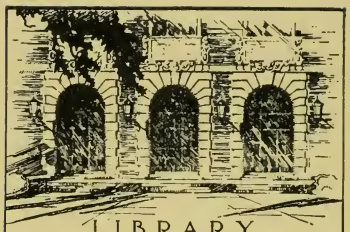

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NADINE.

VOL. II.

NADINE

The Study of a Woman.

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL PRAED,

AUTHOR OF "POLICY AND PASSION," "AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE," ETC.

"Who can say 'Thus far, no farther,' to the tide of his own nature?
Who can mould the spirit's fashion to the counsel of his will?
Square his being by enactment—shape his soul to legislature—
Be himself his law of living, his own art of good and ill?"

J. Brunton Stephens.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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NADINE.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

AN ACTRESS BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS.

For weeks Dr. Bramwell was preyed upon by gnawing care, to which the constant occupation that he was now forced into—for he had established himself in London—afforded almost the only anodyne.

Many times he was impelled to seek Nadine, to recount to her his tale, and to exact from her, denial or corroboration of his haunting fear. But the necessity for his constant presence in London, her stern prohibition upon

his visiting her at Alston, and above all, dread of certainty, held him still in a state of tension and anxiety.

He dared not risk the extinction of his faith which, notwithstanding all that he had seen and heard during his stay at Croxham, burned, if flickeringly, at times brightly as ever, when he recalled words and looks of Nadine's that told of reliance upon, and almost of affection for, himself. These were his consolation. He shrank from the possibility of losing those waking dreams and visions, which at moments, when his doubts were lulled and his judgment sleeping, created for him an illusory but intoxicating joy.

He heard later that she was in town with the Dormers; but their paths seemed to lie

in separate directions, for his avocations did not naturally lead him into the circles which she frequented.

The Derby was run. Jack Halkett's tragically sudden death had become a story of the past. Garlands adorned the balconies of Belgravia and Mayfair, and London, grave and fashionable, frivolous and laborious, was in the full swing of summer life.

Occasionally Bramwell saw Nadine driving down the Ladies' Mile, or riding in the Row, more lovely than ever, but with an expression of languor, almost, he fancied, of spirituality upon her face, that seemed to tell of some inward trouble or refining influence placing her apart from the gay herd, for whom life had so little meaning beyond the pleasure of to-day.

At the sight of her, his yearning to touch her hand, to hear her voice, intensified to craving. He wrote, begging that she would grant him an interview, if possible, alone. No subject could have sued more humbly for an audience from his queen. On her reply, he called at Mrs. Dormer's house at the hour, late in the afternoon, which she had named. The drawing-room was thronged, and Nadine, in her most artificial and least lovable mood, resisted all his mute pleadings for a word apart. He was angry and sore. But one look from her eyes, melting, beseeching, tender, directed towards him as they parted made him her slave once more. He saw that her lips were quivering, and felt that her fingers pressed his ever so slightly when she bade him good-bye. Who does not know the

magnetic thrill, the strange, subduing sense of soul-communion which sometimes lingers after a hand-clasp? Bitterness, wrath, and distrust vanished from Bramwell's heart, and love and hope reigned there instead.

Not for long. The next morning a paragraph in one of the Society journals, at which he happened to glance, thrust him again into the depths of despair.

"*On Friday evening Mrs. Granby Wilton opened her beautiful new house in Grosvenor Gardens. Royalty was present, and Royalty seemed to be especially happy; but the feature of the evening was the sensation caused by 'yet another' fair one, who, under the auspices of Mrs. Dormer, goes into the world for the first time this season. Young, beautiful, and graceful as an houri, Miss Senguin scored a*

decided success, and was honoured by marked attentions from the great ones of the earth."

Dr. Bramwell threw the paper from him in disgust, and went forth on his round. What had he to do with this Nadine of the 'great world'?

Thus, in alternations of excitement and wretchedness, the days wore on. He made several more attempts to see Nadine alone, but to no purpose. It was evidently her wish to avoid him; and Mrs. Dormer, whose suspicions had been faintly aroused, and who, in atonement for her imprudence with regard to Colonel Halkett, was doing her best to achieve a brilliant marriage for her *protégée*, in spite of her sincere regard for Dr. Bramwell, looked upon him now with disfavour, and appeared an enemy rather than an ally.

One chance was left him. A ball in aid of some fashionable charity was shortly to be given in a great empty palace in Kensington. He knew that Nadine would be among those present. She could not refuse to dance with him. Here offered the opportunity for saying those words which he burned yet dreaded to utter. And apart from this motive for going, there was another still stronger. The longing to hold Nadine in his arms, to feast his eyes upon her beauty, enhanced as it would be by all the cunningness of attire, even though he should realize that she must be renounced for ever, possessed him like thirst. Then shame smote him, and he recoiled before the might of his passion. A leprosy seemed to have blighted his love; it was no longer the pure devotion which had

thrown a halo over all that was sordid in his life, and had sanctified womanhood in his eyes for the sake of her whom he hoped to win for his own.

His existence seemed to flow in two currents. Side by side with the daily routine of duty, the commonplace people whom he met and tended, was this keen vibrating consciousness, in which all his senses quivered, he scarce knew if with joy or pain. And if chill, gnawing thoughts sometimes came as unwelcome visitants, what matter? The present bounded the future.

* * * * * *

Though it was comparatively early when Dr. Bramwell arrived at Kensington House, the rooms were filling rapidly. He passed through the bower-like vestibule, lingering

in the suite of ante-chambers, where banks of roses and hot-house flowers bloomed beneath drooping ferns and tropical palms, and where the mellow light of shaded tapers shone upon rare tapestry and antique cabinets, and mirrors reflected back the lustre of diamonds and the sheen of rich apparel; but he sought in vain for Mrs. Dormer's quaint, expressive face and the lily-like head rising behind it. Among the many beauties present Nadine had apparently not yet taken her place.

Later on he caught sight of the sweeping shoulders and perfect profile, as, smiling and curtseying, the brilliant throng drew back in lines, leaving a clear avenue for the passage of Royalty. Again, when the Hungarian Band broke into a strain of plaintive wildness, he lost her in the dance, and at last wandered

forth to the long terrace, where a blaze of limelight, slowly deepening to rose, shed an ethereal radiance round the dark and light figures which passed to and fro, or descending the great flight of steps, mingled with the loiterers in the garden. Bramwell leaned against the balustrade, his eyes fixed idly upon the moving kaleidoscope: nymph-like beings in aërial tulle and shimmering satin; virginal creatures of dove's plumage; maturer angels, not weaned from the frailties of humanity, whose rose-bloom might have been purchased at Rimmel's, with fairness enhanced by *poudre de Ninon*, and eyes brightened by antimony; matrons in sweeping robes and glittering *parures;* politicians, dignitaries, wits, guardsmen, fashionable butterflies, all jostled each other in the promenade. Now

there was a scarcely perceptible flutter and rapid curtsey, as an exalted personage stopped to address a remark to some favoured acquaintance; or again, a momentary pause in the gurgle of conversation and laughter, as a great lady moved by the smiling groups on her way to the dancing-room.

The bloom of ripeness without; within, the rottenness of vanity, intrigue, and lust, which festers at the core of London Society.

Above the great stone house, all outlined in jets of coloured flame, two electric moons vied with the pale orb which sailed serenely in the blue heavens. They shed a spectral glow upon the winding walks and shrubberies enamelled with variegated lamps, and streamed across a sheet of ornamental water bright with the reflection of illuminated arches.

Here Venetian gondolas, in which sat ghostly-looking figures, were noiselessly plying. Showers of fireworks rose and fell in luminous streaks and star-like clusters. The beech-trees, which at one point closed in the garden, were tipped with silvery light, and above them the spire of a neighbouring church stood out grey and solemn against the sky.

Bramwell's gaze was arrested by the object which it sought.

Nadine stood a few paces from him. She was bending forward, her statuesque arms resting upon the parapet, her eyes looking abstractedly towards the lake.

She was all in white; her dress floated round her, a cloud of tulle; her bodice of satin defined the curves of her exquisite bust,

and her neck and throat, with their enchanting dimples and indentations, rose fairer than the lace by which her bosom was veiled; a diamond star gleamed in her dusky hair. Between her clasped hands she held a large bouquet of white flowers, and her clear-cut face seemed to resemble the blossoms in its purity of outline and colouring.

For the moment she was alone. It was Bramwell's opportunity; he advanced. Nadine started as he addressed her, and turned with a half-frightened smile.

"Dr. Bramwell! I did not expect that *you* would be here to-night."

"I came to meet you," he answered impulsively.

"You are very welcome. Since you have become busy and famous we have seen nothing

of you. Is that your fault, or ours? Oh, I know what you would say. In this garish London life there is no time for friendship. I hear that golden honours are already falling thickly upon you, and that through your instrumentality the Race may be in a fair way to become immortal. Why do you not go out more? You might be a lion if you chose. Science is the foible of fashion just now."

Her tone jarred upon his nerves. He was silent, while she continued in her conventional manner,—

"How strange and unreal the garden looks. There's something ghastly in the mixture of moonlight and those coloured lamps. Did you ever off the stage see anything so like a transformation scene? A few

grotesque masks, and one might be at Covent Garden Theatre."

"All life seems unreal sometimes," answered Bramwell, dreamily; then added, "Will you dance this with me—or rather, will you *not* dance it? I want to talk to you. Let us walk down towards the lake instead."

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, looking at him with mournful questioning, then assented, and placed her hand within his arm. But as he felt her touch, and was moved by something in that timid gaze, the temptation of encircling her with his arm in the waltz was too potent to be resisted, and instead of leading her into the garden, he turned towards the ball-room.

A murmur of admiration followed her as she entered, and Bramwell's ears tingled as he

overheard a dark-eyed lady with marigolds in her hair, who was the author of several volumes of erotic verse, say to a gentleman beside her,—

"That girl is just the combination to suit this naughty, white-washed age. She has the face of an angel, the grace and subtlety of a serpent, and the worldliness of a cocotte."

Bramwell shuddered.

"What is the matter?" whispered Nadine, in those wooing tones which seemed to breathe poetry.

He placed his arm round her waist and piloted her across the floor. Her slight frame swayed reed-like in his arms as they glided round to the strains of a dreamy waltz. To Bramwell's excited fancy lights, flowers, and

glittering throng mingled in a confused billowy mass. The perfume which exhaled from Nadine's presence intoxicated his senses. To hold her thus was Paradise.

"Nadine!" he whispered passionately, almost below his breath, then paused abruptly and released her.

He saw that she was trembling and very pale, and her look was sweet and clinging.

"Take me out," she said brokenly; "I am so tired. This has been going on for so long, and I am weary, weary; and there has been no one to feel for me, or to say a word of sympathy. Don't ask me any questions, but be kind to me as you used to be. Let us go into the garden."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE PAVILION.

So bewildered was Bramwell by Nadine's rapid change of mood that he could only silently obey her entreaty. They went forth on to the terrace, then down the broad flight of steps into the garden. For a few moments they stood by the lake watching the gondolas gliding swan-like from bank to bank, and the fireworks shooting up into the sky, and descending in showers of stars and fiery streaks. Presently Bramwell led his companion into a sequestered walk which brought them to a

pavilion almost concealed by the thick foliage of the shrubbery. This, like many other tents scattered about the grounds, was decorated with ferns and flowers, dimly lighted, and furnished with luxurious settees. He placed Nadine on a couch, saying in that passionate tone which always seemed to affect her powerfully,—

"We will stay here."

The curtains had fallen when they entered, over the entrance to the tent. They were completely alone. The murmur of music and of voices floated faintly across the lake, otherwise they might have been in the solitude of an enchanted forest.

Nadine leaned back on the couch, her white neck and the slender column of her throat defined against the cushions of Eastern stuff

with which it was lined; her chin uplifted, her hands idly clasping her bouquet, her eyes fixed and melancholy, gazing abstractedly into space.

Dr. Bramwell stood looking down upon her. He saw then what he had hardly noticed before, that her face was worn, her eyes hollow, and that she looked very ill.

His heart was beating tumultuously. The almost voluptuous excitement which during the waltz had thrilled him had not yet subsided; but mingling with it was a feeling of stern revulsion and loathing of the leaven of passion that seemed now to blend mysteriously with his love. His spiritual attitude was one of conflict with his human impulses of late so strangely stimulated. Was it, that the indefinable change in Nadine had worked

a corresponding alteration in himself, so that in his mind she was transformed from an angel who had been worshipped, to a syren whom it was his duty to shun?

He felt the barrier which circumstance, his own shrinking from the pain of conviction, and her constrained, artificial manner had raised between them must, at all cost of suffering, be broken down to-night. His whole being was charged with the consciousness of impending crisis. He knew intuitively that Nadine's mood swayed towards his own, and that she too was passing through a phase of emotion in which reserve could not for long be maintained. It was as though winged words hovered in space around them, and Bramwell's abrupt utterance which broke the silence seemed but the echo of previous speech.

"Nadine, this mockery of fair appearance between us cannot be kept up any longer. It is six weeks since I besought your confidence before we parted at Croxham. Your boast then was an empty one. You *cannot* show an impassible face to the world, or delude yourself or others into the belief that you have an insensible heart. You act very well, but there is a strain which nature will not bear. I should be blind indeed if I could not see in you the signs of ever present pain. This gaiety, display, adulation can be no antidote to the misery that is poisoning your life. It brings you only weariness and sickening disgust."

"You are right," she answered listlessly. "Dead sea fruit. The taste of ashes is between my teeth."

"Why keep up the hollow farce?" cried Bramwell with indignant passion. "You do not deceive me. I—who of all men have the strongest claim upon you—I who love you more madly than any other—read your suffering too plainly. Why try to deceive an idle crowd for which you care nothing? Go home. Make your moan if needs must, and overcome your trouble. Time blunts all emotions, softens the worst grief. But be true; be true to your womanhood. This seeming falsity in you, whom I have trusted and worshipped, is more bitter to me far than my own despair. Listen, Nadine." He seated himself in a chair beside her; and resting his arms upon the head of her couch, while he gazed with solemn eyes at her averted face, continued, hurried out of himself,

as it were, by the rush of agitated remonstrance, so that it seemed no longer Bramwell who was speaking. "This uncertainty is torture; I can bear no more. I have been a coward, dreading a sword-thrust that might kill my faith for ever. Better to brace myself and know the truth. I have a thing to tell you of that night at Croxham. No need for you to go back on memory; *that* page must be written in letters of fire—our fanciful conversation in the hall, the legend of the White Lady,—you recollect? Your sudden paleness, the strangeness of your manner, the glance you interchanged with Halkett, your evasion of my appeal, all maddened me. I was torn by jealousy; horrible suspicions had entered my mind. I remembered Lady Alsager's words on the race-course—my brain

was burning. When I had gone to my room to sleep was impossible. I could think only of you and of *him*. . . . You will recall the night it was—the sky overcast, the moon shining in fitful gleams, the wind risen and moaning sullenly, sweeping the turrets. Three o'clock had struck; everything was still except the wind. I had opened my window, and the lights upon my dressing-table were extinguished by a sudden gust. . . . It was then that I heard another sound—deeper—nearer than the blast—a sound of muffled, toilsome dragging, all down the corridor from the west wing, halting, now slow, then quicker. It approached my door, passed; and then there flashed through my mind the legend which had been told us that evening. My brain was full of strange bewilderment; underlying all was

the thought of you. It did not seem to be I myself who was waiting, listening. I scarcely knew whether I were awake, or in a dream, or in my right mind. . . . I looked forth into the corridor. *You*, maybe, know what shadowy woman's shape I saw in the dimness. Suddenly the wind stirred the curtain of an unclosed window. Moonlight streamed in—for a second the darkness was light, and I beheld the phantom figure and its burden. A broad ray flashed upon both. I saw the white face; I saw the glitter of diamonds upon the frenzied fingers; I saw the agonized hands clutch the dead body, and hurl it beyond the baize partition. Then all was blackness; the vision was no more. . . . A horror came over me. . . . When I rushed forward the corridor was empty."

Nadine's bouquet fell with a heavy thud, and lay bruised upon the floor. She half-rose, her lips parted, trembling in every limb, perspiration upon her brow.

"You—you *saw* this?" she gasped. "Oh no, no! It was fancy. Your brain had been excited. You slept, and dreamed that you were awake. This *was* so. No!" and she laughed wildly. "The ghosts at Croxham were walking, and it was the White Lady who passed through the corridor that night."

"I would sacrifice all my faith in science for such a belief, were it possible," said Dr. Bramwell sadly. "Yet so great was the shock, so horrible the fear, that then, even later, I might have persuaded myself that the vision had no existence except in my imagination had I not possessed proof positive of its reality."

"Proof! How? What proof?"

Nadine bent forward, an image of agonized alarm and entreaty.

"*This.*"

Dr. Bramwell held before Nadine a heart-shaped cluster of diamonds, which glittered now in the light of a coloured lantern pendent from the roof of the tent.

She clutched the ring; her eyes, like those of a wounded doe at bay, met his for an instant. She uttered a low cry. Then a change came over her face, helplessness and marble stillness, and she sank back fainting against the cushions.

Reaction seized Bramwell. He bent over her, his whole being stirred to its depths by compassion, tenderness, and unreasoning wrath against himself. He reproached himself

with inward bitterness for the abrupt manner in which he had broken to her his knowledge of the events of that tragic night. "Fool—brute that I am!" he muttered. He tore off her gloves, kissed her cold fingers, and chafed them between his own, whispering words of endearment, while by every means in his power he tried to reanimate the motionless form.

"Oh, Nadine!" he murmured, "my love, my darling! You bade me be kind, and, idiot-like, I have smitten you as though you were my enemy."

He pressed his lips to hers in a transport of passion. Never before had he so forgotten himself. She opened her eyes, and he saw in them something of the same blank horror as had transfixed her features during that

momentary flash of moonlight in the corridor at Croxham.

At this moment Bramwell was not master of himself. He experienced that feeling when the world and duty seem slipping away, and overmastering emotion is all that makes life real. Glamour, mystery, peril seemed to have transformed existence. Formerly, he had viewed it, as it were, from an altitude; now, it was as though he had descended, and urged by human passion, was struggling hotly with the baser crowd.

Nadine too appeared deeply moved, though after another fashion. The wild despair in Bramwell's eyes, the casting away of all his habitual self-control, had set her heart vibrating in new chords. Hitherto in their relations she had, while succumbing to a certain

vague impressionability which it had been partly her pleasure to intensify, held herself mistress of her feelings and of the situation. But the change in Bramwell had wrought one in her mental attitude towards him, and it seemed as though all instincts of domination, all surface emotions, had been swept away, and that they two stood alone in the universe, no longer as man to woman, but as soul to soul.

Impelled by this consciousness, and with the sense of a motive power at work within him, —not his own will, but something spiritual, which yearned in fierce pity towards her and towards himself,—Bramwell went on in low-toned eagerness,—

"It is not now between us a question of love given and sought; it is something

deeper, touching our souls more closely. The remembrance of that night at Croxham is a chasm into which your fearless girlhood and my tender hopes have sunk. But *you* remain; *you*, the ideal or the woman, and my love, gold or dross. . . We can never be again as we were. We have probed dark realities that must make all commonplace intercourse, all conventional wooing, seem a mockery and a sham. . . . This life is maddening; it is weaving garlands round the head of a corpse, disguised by the grinning mask of comedy. You cheat your world, Nadine; but *I* am not of your world. If I could convey to you what I have endured of late, even *you* would pity me. For the last six weeks I have been living through a horrible nightmare. It is true that but

for the evidence of this ring, which I *saw* flash on the hand of the phantom woman as she passed into the darkness, I might have believed the scene a creation of my disordered brain, and might have convinced myself that you, lulled by my composing draught, were at that time sleeping peacefully, innocent of all part in Colonel Halkett's death."

"What!" cried Nadine, starting to her feet, and wrenching her hand from Bramwell's grasp. "It had entered your mind that I—that *I* murdered him?"

Bramwell was silent for a moment, then said in shaken tones,—

"You will understand that the morning after that awful night, when I was taken straight into the presence of death, my mind

was a maze of bewilderment and horror, and the most frightful suspicions were not unnatural. But examination dispelled them quickly. Colonel Halkett died suddenly of heart disease—so much is clear to me. The rest is a mystery, which has haunted me like a shadowy fiend. It has made the darkness fearful, and has turned my days into a waking nightmare. The misery was greater than could be borne. I determined that to-night I *must* know the worst. . . . Nadine!—oh do not cry; this unmans me. . . Nadine, hear me."

She had sunk down again, and with her hands covering her face, was sobbing uncontrollably. Whatever might be the contradictions of her nature, the strange blendings in it of impulsiveness and self-command, all

were merged now in an outburst telling only of helplessness and despair. Could this be the pale, defiant woman who had borne herself so bravely in the supreme crisis of her fate? She wept on, her frame shook with deep-drawn sobs. At intervals there fell from her lips low, heart-rending whispers, broken by pitiful gasps.

"Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do? Oh, my God, what can I do?"

Riven with the anguish of watching and hearing, Bramwell waited till the paroxysm had almost passed, and quivering sighs only came like those uttered by a child weary of crying. His worst dread seemed to have received confirmation, and to overwhelm him with deeply gathering horror. He sought refuge from it in hurried speech.

"There is one solution," he said hoarsely. "I have repeated it to myself so often that it has become borne in upon me as truth, and has comforted me in my despair. Nadine, let me speak as though I were your brother. Trust in my loyalty, my reverence. That night—listen—is not this how it was? *He* forced his way into your room. You repulsed him. In the excitement and agitation death struck him?"

Bramwell paused and waited breathlessly for her reply. None came. She sat motionless, her eyes bent downwards. In his agony he quitted her side and walked towards the door of the tent. Here he stood for several moments looking earnestly upon her, while there was still silence. At length the strain became unbearable, and he turned his face resolutely away from her.

Aware of the movement, she seemed to interpret it as a sign of desertion. For a second the old defiance revived. She uplifted her head, her lips framed the words,—

"Go; think the worst of me that you choose. I can live without you."

Though she had spoken so low as to be inaudible, his mind grasped at her meaning. He turned once more, uttering an ejaculation of reproach. As she met his gaze the momentary expression of defiance vanished; once more her features and attitude conveyed only imploring dependence.

"Where can I look for help if not from you?" she murmured, slightly extending her arms.

Obeying the gesture of appeal, he moved impulsively to her and clasped her hand,

his touch seeming to convey the solemnity of a pledge.

"I will help you," he said, "through anything, everything, if there be need of my help; only trust me. Remember that I am ignorant, and that I have been racked by doubts that may have wronged you. Remember that I love you. . . . But all personal feeling is merged in the longing to answer to your need, whatever it may be. I was wrong to speak so insistently; it was cruel. Tell me only what you feel it a relief to say."

She motioned him from the chair on which he knelt to a place on the couch near her.

"Sit there—so. . . . And don't look at me. I will try to tell you. . . . I don't know if I can—all; but I will try. . . . And

you will be patient; you will try to understand?"

His only answer was to tighten his clasp of her hand. Nadine went on in broken language, her thoughts following a mental sequence independent of the order of events, pausing frequently, and speaking in beseeching accents as a child might who was confessing a fault of which it dreaded to reveal the worst consequences.

"It is not as you think—not quite. Think worse than that—if it be worse. . . . You remember what I said long ago at Alston—how long ago it is!—about evil lying latent in our natures and springing up at an outward touch? Vanity, love of power, all sorts of desires and impulses, which seem to tell of something in us that we had never dreamed of

till we grow frightened at ourselves, and our brain becomes confused between true right and what the world calls right. . . . Ah! there is the contradiction! Within and without the law, human instincts are the same, love is the same; and yet it is only a shadow, a form of words that makes the distinction between virtue and vice."

CHAPTER III.

NADINE'S CONFESSION.

NADINE paused; Bramwell could not speak. The silence seemed heavy with coming revelation. The very drawing of his breath was pain. After a minute Nadine went on, gathering up the scattered threads,—

"It began to come upon me that time in London that I wasn't like others—that there were in me capacities for strong feelings, and all sorts of mixed impulses making me restless, and drawing me against myself. I wanted to understand life; I wanted to love.

I did let myself love, when something told me it was wrong. I knew that I wasn't like a girl —that I did not shrink from things which . . . —and that made me afraid. I had no one to whom I could speak. Women are hedged in and tied round. To be true to themselves is to be false to their sex. . . . I felt myself to be half-hard, half-impetuous, cynical, calculating, and daring at the same time, so that I could rush to a precipice and yet pause on the brink and count the cost of falling. . . . And it seemed a noble thing to fling oneself down in the hope of saving another whom one loved from a base, unhappy life. But there was not only that feeling. I don't want you to think better of me than I deserve: there were other feelings more unworthy—I was afraid of being forsaken.

I had set a fire burning, and I could not quench it—and I could not fly. . . . Ah, do you not understand? You said that you would help me. You might have helped me then; you can't lift me up now. . . . You said that my good name was sacred to you. *It is at your mercy.*" The tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly she looked at him and said, swayed by a less selfish emotion, "I give you great pain?"

"The worst pain," said Bramwell very low, "is in knowing that I can do nothing for you."

"This is weakness," said Nadine. "I should have defied you—braved everything. I thought that I could do so; but it was impossible. Whenever I met your eyes they seemed to say, 'I know your secret,' and they made me loathe everything. And I am

lonely, I am very wretched; this struggle is wearing me out."

For the first time since she had bidden him avert his eyes Bramwell looked at her. She withdrew her hand from his and hid her face, while sobs again rent her frame. The anguish of hearing her confession had become so great that personal feeling held at this moment no place in Bramwell's consciousness. The blow had fallen, and still, it seemed now that for a long time certainty had been in his mind. A great wave had rolled over him, and he was left mentally stunned. Yet from the trough of despair he clutched at a straw, the last shred of his faith. He said huskily,

"But you were deceived—you believed him free."

There was silence. Again Bramwell turned away his eyes. To watch her struggling sobs was too painful. She continued, in an undertoned utterance, still in the same fragmentary manner,—

"I did not know,—not at first,—only I seemed to understand always that there was a bar. They did not tell me that he was married—till afterwards. . . . But it was not as people thought. That knowledge made very little difference. The feeling was too strong: it was like thirst. I used once to laugh to myself over poetry and romances; and I thought that to love in that way was unnatural—just as I always fancied that temptation of such a kind could never come near me. It was a mystery. *I* was a mystery to myself. . . . I could

not bear the dread lest he might ever forsake me. I knew dimly that he did not care for me in the way that—as *you* cared for me. But it made no difference—nothing made any difference. . . . It was fascination, something which compelled me from the first. I was always thinking of him, when I was alone or with others—always wanting to tell him of thoughts which came into my mind—longing for the touch of his hand or a look from his eyes—longing to hear him say that I made his life better, that I was his good angel. Oh me! it seems now such mockery, such mockery! . . . And then, when he talked of our going away to another land, of our being husband and wife in God's sight—I wondered often if there were any God, and if there were, how it could give Him

pleasure to torture a weak girl like me, when it would have been so easy for Him to order everything differently. I thought of you, and of how you did not believe in the after-world. And then it seemed to me that if there were no immortal future, all the creeds and codes of this world went for nothing; and that it was only just that we should take the joys offered us, when the doing so would wrong no one. I felt that you must have a law of morality more righteous than that of churches, and that if I could tell you everything you might perhaps help me. . . . That was what was in my mind when I came back from London. And I tried to tell you—that night at Alston."

A pang of exceeding bitterness pierced Bramwell's heart when, even at that moment,

it struck him as characteristic of Nadine's egoistic temperament that she should have considered only her own need, and should have felt no compunction for the pain that she inflicted upon him. He started back as though the thought had been treason and involuntarily shuddered, for it revealed to him too surely that his goddess had fallen.

By some subtle current of sympathy the same idea darted through Nadine's mind.

"You think that I was heartless, that I had no remorse for the suffering I must cause you. . . Dr. Bramwell, if I were to try till Doomsday to analyze my feelings towards you then, and now, they would still remain a mystery. I did not wish you to think well of me, and yet I shrank from appearing despicable to you. You had a strange

influence over me—always. It began partly in myself. I yielded to the impression, I wished to deepen it, and yet to keep the reins; I wished to experimentalize on you and on myself. Now you see that I am calculating. But it was more—more than mere coquetry and love of power. . . . The knowledge that you believed me innocent seemed a safeguard against evil desires. It would have been better for us both if you had doubted me. I had a notion that because of your character, your profession, you must have a keener insight than most men into human nature. And yet, when I saw daily how little you understood me—! But I wished to tell you everything. Does not that show you how I trusted you? . . I don't know why I had this impluse, except that I

wanted you to understand me. I was afraid of myself; I was afraid of committing suicide, as it were; and I knew that if I were on the point of destroying myself morally, and it was right that I should be saved, you would save me, even against myself. . . . That night while I played—it was on my lips; but the very sense that I had power over you, that I could stir your feelings by a word, a look, held the confession back. I could not endure to lose the power. . . . And then you said that you loved me. . . . And all that was worst in me came uppermost; it was like the taste of blood to a wild creature which had been brought up tame—wicked thoughts, cold, cruel plans of deceiving and— Then afterwards, loathing of myself. . . . Do you hate me now?"

"It could never be my impulse to hate you," said Bramwell in deep-shaken tones. "Oh, that you had confided in me!" he exclaimed in passionate sorrow. "I would have saved you,—at the cost of tearing the heart from your bosom, at the cost," and his voice sank to a fierce whisper, "of taking the tempter's life. Nadine," he went on more gently, "I don't want you to be oppressed by a sense of guilt towards me. You were under no obligation to love me, and now you have enough to bear without the added pain of thinking that you have wronged me. Why did you not trust me? Could you not have believed that my devotion was not wholly selfish, that I could have found consolation for my own sorrow in comforting you—in instilling into your

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mind the truth that no love can be perfect unless it be pure?"

"No," said Nadine; and in the movement of her uplifted chin there was some faint, pitiful trace of her former self. "You do not yet understand me. I have not sunk so low as to humble myself in penitence before you. I am not repentant. My nature has made my fate, and I have obeyed it. All that I have had in me now was in me before, and more—for now I am cutting myself off from a temptation which you do not know of. . . . This is not the true Nadine. The real woman is she whom you see in crowds—too proud to court pity, masking misery under smiles. But to-night the stress is harder than human nature can support; the springs are broken.

I *must* speak—I *must* have a word of sympathy—or die."

Her voice gathering intensity with compressed passion, broke suddenly. She turned towards Bramwell, and her eyes, wild and dilated, met his full. The anguish of pity in his face, which no words could represent, seemed to throw her back into the attitude of helpless appeal that all through the interview had impressed him so strangely. She leaned a little towards him, and began again in a frightened whisper.

"I *must* speak—I *must* tell you, or I shall go mad. Sometimes I think that I *am* mad. Oh, the darkness! the horrible darkness! Even though there is light in the room it seems always dark; and I see *it*. . . . I see it always—everywhere—most distinctly

at night. It is outside myself, and yet it is *me*. . . . . That white woman, with her long hair—and her staring eyes. . . . . And her arms strained—clutching—dragging—and oh! so heavy, so heavy. . . . . And the horror —the dread lest strength should fail, and I should sink before the door is reached! I see the dead face. . . . . Oh, my God, what shall I do? How shall I escape from it?"

She crouched down shuddering convulsively; her lips remained parted, and her eyes were fixed blankly in space upon the vision which her imagination had conjured. Bramwell had no words in which to soothe her. He could only look dumbly and fold her hands more tightly between both of his. Deepening the sense of unreality, and, as it were, in grim mockery of his own wretchedness and of the

unhappy woman's despair, a weird melody, one of the Hungarian national airs transposed as a waltz, floated down from the ball-room, and with it mingled the sound of voices and laughter as every now and then the *portière* of the pavilion was brushed aside by some passing promenader; while through the aperture were revealed fitful rays of the electric light, which coldly illuminated the glade. But from all sense of outward incongruity Nadine seemed far removed. Under the stress of that strange impulse which prompted her to self-revelation, she proceeded, still in the same unnatural whisper,—

"I will tell you the truth—of that night. I want you to understand, so that everything may be bare between us; and then I want you to leave me, and never by word or look

remind me in future of what I have told you. I wish your knowledge to be my safeguard. It was as you thought—partly. That day when you spoke to me on the racecourse, and I said that perhaps shortly you would look upon me with horror,—you remember? —my mind was made up. I had determined to forsake my home and my father, and to go and live with *him* in another land, far away—where there could be no deceiving. And yet I felt a wicked joy in deceiving. . . . But it was the being with you that turned my thoughts backward—to papa, and the old life; and I repented. *He* was with me. He was full of excitement and joy. You know he had won largely that day, so that everything was easy. It was as though Fate were throwing riches, opportunity, all into our

hands. But I said that we would wait a little longer. I said that we were acting a lie, and that a scene in the drama more or less did not matter. And he replied in a way that maddened me—and I reproached him. And then—then it was all over in a minute—and I sat holding his dead hand, and knowing that the curse had fallen on me. . . . This is why I have told you. If I know that I have told you, it may seem to me perhaps more like a dreadful dream, and I may be saved from doing in madness something which could never be altered—which would haunt me in life and when I was dead. . . . For," and her voice grew terrible in its low distinctness, "all sorts of things are in my mind. I am afraid of what I may do in the future—I am afraid—The thought has come to me sometimes that

if I were to marry—and some day I shall forget and be tempted, and I shall marry—that I should kill . . . . the impulse would come to me to act it all through again. It would be like fulfilling a doom. . . . That is the feeling which was in me before—before you came to Croxham—that there was a curse upon me. . . . . I had struggled—and after I had— Then wicked spirits possessed me. . . . I did not know before what it would be. And then—when I knew, and it was done, and could never be undone all my life through, I wished to give myself up utterly, so that there could be no turning back. It seemed to me that it did not matter any more what happened to me. I wanted to defy people. But still I used to pray that his wife might die. If by *willing* I could have killed her,

God's lightning would have struck her dead. That was what made me feel most that I had become wicked. Often at night when there were strange sounds in my room I would fancy that the evil ghosts of Croxham were gathered round my bed, saying to each other, 'She is lost—she is one of us. She must obey her doom.' . . . . And that night—the dead face was turned up to mine—and the dear eyes. . . . My life seemed outside me—my life, my love, my honour, all. . . . I tried to shriek, but no voice came . . . . and the spirits pressed round me . . . . the room was full of voices crying, 'Shame—despair!' An icy coldness crept over me; I was like stone. And I said, 'I will defy the world; I will save myself.' . . . . And I lifted *it* up—and the eyes seemed to say, 'Save

yourself!' and I dragged, and dragged, and dragged—oh, the terrible way!—all down the silent corridor—past door after door, with my body bending under the weight of the dead limbs, and my heart turned to stone. The strength that was in me seemed not mine. It was not *I*.... it was the spirit of the wicked lady of Croxham.... And I knew it, and she laughed in my ear—as at nights she laughs still .... and I was afraid lest she should desert me, and I should have no more power, and the door would be closed."

Again a fit of shuddering seized her; again the strength which his touch brought her carried her on.

"You see, it is like a crime—burned into me.... But I did not do anything really wicked. I had not stolen or committed

murder, or injured another person. It was I only who was injured. Surely we have a right to shape our own lives as we choose. Why should I be haunted as the vilest murderer might be haunted? The misery of having lost my happiness is light pain compared to the torture of inward conflict—the terror of things unseen—the terror of myself. This is what I cannot bear."

There was a note of pathetic, forlorn protest in her voice. It was pitiful to witness the warring of her members, the effort at self-comprehension, the groping after self-justification.

"You will not believe," said Bramwell with sorrowful sternness, "that your higher nature is avenging itself."

Nadine did not answer. Bramwell, stooping, raised her fallen bouquet, and mechanically

began to remove the bruised blossoms. There seemed something suggestive in the action. She held out her hand and took the bouquet from him, saying in a tone half-mournful, half bitter,

"You can never make it fresh again."

At that moment the curtain of the pavilion was drawn aside, and a great personage with a beautiful woman upon his arm entered, not observing at the first glance that the place was tenanted. Nadine rose hurriedly; then, self-possession regained, curtsied as she replied to the gracious remark addressed to her, and, followed by Bramwell, passed out into the garden.

The scene fitfully illuminated, the festoons of jewel-like lights, the strains of music and array of moving figures, acted more

quickly upon her mobile temperament than upon that of Bramwell. To him the contrast between mood and surroundings seemed sacrilegious, and he longed wildly to bear her away into darkness and solitude. She paused as they passed a fountain, and stooping, dipped her fingers into the basin and lightly bathed her eyes.

"Back to the *raree*-show," she said bitterly. "There must be no tears under the mask. Enough has been said to make you despise and forsake me. That is what I wish. Let the past be buried. The book is sealed for ever between you and me; never try to open it."

"Nadine!" cried Bramwell, swept along by a passion from which in any saner moment he might have shrunk appalled, "I can never

forsake you; the past cannot be buried in this way. As well bid me forget that I am myself. My life is yours; and how can I serve you better than by standing between you and the world—between you and your worst self? Let me restore to you the purity which is a part of your real nature. Have faith in yourself. Take comfort from my faith in you——"

She interrupted him, shaking her head and looking at him almost pityingly.

"No, no; all this capacity for high feeling exists only in your conception of me. That is how you fail to obtain any real mastery over me: you will not see me as I am—the slave of a temperament, which I accept as a fate, and would not escape from if I could, because I can realize no other."

"You shall not take this view of yourself," exclaimed Bramwell fervently. "You shall, you *must* see your true self in the image of you that is mirrored in my mind. Be my wife. Let our marriage be a new starting-point for the future. I do not ask your love; I can be content with your confidence. I ask nothing but the right to protect and comfort you."

Nadine turned away, and for a moment seemed to be battling with fresh emotion. At last she said, in a voice very tender, and at the same time unutterably sad,—

"You offer to marry me, notwithstanding the thing you know of me—*you* of all men? . . . . And I thought you cold! Ah me! But I said—I said always that you would be very loyal. Do you not know

that I have told you everything in great part because I wished to cut you off for ever from any thought of that kind? I think that you are capable at this moment of the most complete self-sacrifice; but I am not base enough to accept it from you. That would be murder indeed—murder of my own better instincts—murder of your peace, of everything. Think what it would be to live with a woman whom you despised, and who hated you—for I should hate you. No; to-morrow, when you are calm, you will be deeply thankful that I have refused to accept your devotion. It will be the only cause for gratitude that I shall ever have given you. The kindest wish I can frame for you is that you may learn to love another woman. As for me, it is better that I should sink to

my level, and marry—if I ever do marry—a man who will require from me no more than I can give. You and I must remain apart. I beseech you for the present at least to avoid me. To-morrow I may repent the impulse which to-night has prompted my confession to you, and the very sight of you may goad me to something worse. Henceforth on this subject your lips are sealed even to me. Remember this, and for the rest, we are as completely divided, in all sense of marriage, as priest and nun."

He began to speak, but she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"No—no more. For your own sake be silent, and from this time shun me as you would shun your worst enemy. Now, take me back to the ball-room."

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE VALLEY OF DESPAIR.

For nearly six months Dr. Bramwell saw nothing of Nadine Senguin. She left London soon after the ball at Kensington House, and he heard of her vaguely as having refused to join the Dormers in a yachting expedition, and as being occupied at Alston in attendance upon her invalid father.

This news Bramwell hailed as the harbinger of awakening good.

He had obeyed her command, and had

sedulously avoided all possibility of the renewal of their intercourse. In this he had acted partly from deliberation. He was afraid for himself. Though his love had gained, if possible, in intensity, he was able to recognize in it an element, as it were, of witch-craft, which might in a moment of passion overcome his better judgment. Absent from Nadine, the feeling of revulsion deepened, though blending with it was a pity almost divine. He loathed the sin, yet after a manner reverenced the sinner; and at this time the consecration of himself to her need seemed the mournful yet sweet necessity imposed upon him by his love and by her fall. The future held hope; but in the present he acknowledged it best for her sake

and for his own that they should remain apart.

His work was the safety-valve for all pent-up emotion. He threw himself with ardour into the practice of his profession and the prosecution of scientific discovery. Several slight circumstances, apart from the attention which his medical work had excited among *savants*, combined to bring him into notoriety. In a shorter space than he could have imagined possible, the prosperous career, of which in the old days at Alston he had lovingly dreamed, seemed opening before him. Yet with opportunity there appeared to have vanished the zest for fame, the incentive towards worldly endeavour.

One evening when he had come home

late from his round, he found awaiting him the following letter from Mrs. Dormer :—

"*Croxham, November 2nd.*

"DEAR DR. BRAMWELL,

"Have you become too busy to remember old friends, or are you not yet famous enough to allow yourself a Sunday's holiday, and run down to Croxham for dinner on Saturday evening, returning, after the custom of London men, by our early Monday train ?

"I wish that you could come to us on the 10th. We shall have comparatively an empty house—only two or three country neighbours collected for the first meet near here of the Chauceley hounds—and Mrs. Bartelotte and her husband. You will remember her as connected with poor Jack Halkett's melancholy death in the spring. None of the same party have been here since; and I, who am, as you know, impressionable to such influences, dread

a reunion shadowed by the memory of a lost friend. But my husband, who laughs at any sentimentality on my part, insists that Mrs. Bartelotte, who is a particular favourite of his, should be asked, and it was with difficulty that I persuaded him to arrange Nadine Senguin's long-promised visit for a week later, when we have some balls in prospect. I mention this that you may choose your own time if the 10th does not seem to you to promise sufficient attraction. In any case you need only telegraph an hour beforehand. Apart from the pleasure of seeing you, I am anxious to consult you about my own health, which has not been of late as satisfactory as I could wish. With my husband's kindest remembrances,

"I am very sincerely yours,

"Nellie Dormer."

So bitter was the remembrance of his

last visit to Croxham, that Bramwell's first impulse was to refuse the invitation. Had he not been assured of not meeting Nadine Senguin, he must at once have declined it. To be thrown into her society in that house would be too painful. As it was, his conscience smote him with regard to the Dormers, to whom he felt himself to be under obligations. With Mrs. Dormer he had always been particularly intimate; and he knew that in the treatment of her malady, one of the nerves complicated by troubles that she had confided to him, connected with her domestic life, no one could be so successful as himself; while her reliance upon his help and sympathy established a claim upon him which he would not willingly evade.

He wrote vaguely that he would try to

make arrangements for the 10th, and added that, owing to his press of engagements, he would avail himself of Mrs. Dormer's permission to telegraph a few hours only before his departure from London.

It was late upon a raw November day when he arrived at Croxham. The dressing bell had rung, and he was at once taken to his room, the same which he had occupied upon his former visit; and only made his appearance in the drawing-room simultaneously with the butler who announced dinner.

Harry Dormer, brilliant in pink, his good-humoured face almost as bright as his coat, glowing after a hard day across country, paused in the act of offering his arm to old Lady Critchell and shook hands with Bramwell.

"Well, Doctor, I'm glad to see you. Wish you could have managed to get down earlier. It was a stunning run. I wouldn't mind laying long odds the best we shall see this season. Dear! dear! Do you recollect the last time you were at Croxham? I thought of poor Jack Halkett this afternoon riding home from Burswell. You were very near having a case waiting for you—an accident to the phaeton; Lumley's charioteering. I've got a bone to pick with you, Deodatus, about my chestnut mare's broken knees. Happily beyond that, no harm was done except a shaking, and the young lady whom he was driving so recklessly is keeping her room this evening. Allow me, Lady Critchell. Bramwell, you will take in Mrs. Bartelotte."

Presently Bramwell found himself seated

beside that vivacious lady, whose spirits seemed in no way to have suffered from certain reverses at Newmarket which she shortly confided to her companion.

"You see that I am as inveterate a gambler as of old, Dr. Bramwell. Ever since that extraordinary dream of Jem Ormthwaite's about the winner of the Chollerton Cup, I've taken to racing instead of *trente et quarante* as an outlet for my wickedness. Anyhow, Epsom and Newmarket are handier than Monte Carlo, and I guess they are more respectable. Well, and what have you been doing since I saw you last? I hear you are fixed up convenient in London. Have you found out yet why poor Jack Halkett did not die a little sooner or a little later? That's the worst of you doctors—you are always

too late to do any good except find a reason for things. I must say I don't care about reasons. Do you remember how we all bundled off that morning as grim as mutes at a funeral? Poor Jack! I dare say you wouldn't believe that I had a good cry when I got home that evening. You were very nearly coming in for another tragedy to-day. Mr. Lumley and Miss Senguin were in such state of excitement or mental aberration that they forgot they were hunting on wheels, and tried to jump a stone wall. Oh, you need not look so frightened —no bones were broken, and the worst result of the catastrophe is, that the beautiful Nadine is having tea and toast in her bed-room instead of gladdening our eyes down-stairs."

"Is Miss Senguin here?" asked Dr. Bramwell abruptly, turning to Mrs. Dormer, who was on his other hand.

"She came yesterday," was the reply. "I dare say that you are surprised. So was I when I got a letter from her a few days ago, saying that she hated balls and large country-house parties, and wished to come to us now for a little milder dissipation. But you will have discovered, Dr. Bramwell, that Nadine's moods are somewhat incalculable. This accident is unfortunate, though she is not the least hurt, and would not let me send for Dr. Hervey. However, I insisted upon her keeping quiet this evening."

Deeply disturbed, Bramwell turned with little appetite to the business of dinner. He had been at pains to avoid Nadine; he

dreaded meeting her, and yet now that he learned suddenly the fact of her presence under that roof with him, his heart throbbed with wild pleasure, his pulses tingled at the anticipation of again touching her hand, and it seemed impossible that he could for so long have voluntarily denied himself the joy of beholding her. But he asked no further questions, and took his part as best he could in the conversation that flowed around him. Fortunately Mrs. Bartelotte required little entertainment, but rippled on in her low-toned monologue, which, if it produced upon the senses an impression as vague as the sound of running water, had at least the merit of effectually filling up blanks. The party was comparatively a small one, consisting, besides the guests in

the house, of a neighbouring squire and his wife, the parson and his wife, and Sir Peter and Lady Critchell. Sir Peter was a bluff, ruddy-faced old gentleman, who reverenced no personages upon earth except his sovereign and a genuinely successful M. F. H., and who was now with sepulchral distinctness epitomizing the claims to social consideration, from a fox-hunting point of view, of a gentleman who had lately established himself in the neighbourhood, and who had been so unfortunate that day as to provoke Sir Peter's ire by an ill-timed jest at a blank covert.

"H'm!" grunted Sir Peter. "He don't like foxes. I don't call that *foolish;* I call it *wicked.* I don't mean to say," after a pause devoted to an attack upon the wing

of a pheasant, "that he's a *bad* man. Don't hunt, but lets other people hunt; don't shoot, but lets other people shoot; don't drink, but keeps good wine. But he jokes about foxes; and I tell you what it is"—glaring fiercely round—"foxes are too serious a subject to be joked about in *this* country."

"Well, I will say," said Mrs. Bartelotte with her air of candour, "that you make as much fuss over foxes in your country as we do over Congress men in ours. I'm doing my best to respect British institutions, Sir Peter, but I reckon the world wouldn't stop still, after all, if a fox were killed at Dunkley Beeches instead of Gripely Wood."

"You think so, ma'am, do you?" growled Sir Peter, and betook himself again to the

discussion of his pheasant; whereupon Harry Dormer, who liked nothing better than to chaff Mrs. Bartelotte, tried to draw her out upon the subject of British institutions in general, but she refused to answer to the bait, and with a pretty grimace turned to Dr. Bramwell and caused him to become first red, then white, by inquiring whether he had yet made acquaintance with any of the Croxham ghosts. Mrs. Dormer was not in her usual spirits. She looked pale, and it was evident that she was suffering. Conversation flagged in the drawing-room, and there was no music to enliven the evening. Lady Critchell set example to the other guests by an early departure, and before half-past ten all the ladies had retired. Dr. Bramwell, after a short conference with Mrs.

Dormer, when, concerned at the state of her health, he urged her to remain in her room during the following day, joined the gentlemen in the smoking-room for a little while; then, on the plea of having some important writing to finish, excused himself to his host and went to his own old room.

The associations connected with the chamber were as fresh in his mind as though Colonel Halkett's death had taken place but yesterday. Every trifling detail of surrounding,—the arrangement of the furniture, the folding of the drapery, the blazing logs upon the hearth,—all recalled to him the strange phase of consciousness through which upon that terrible night he had passed, and seemed to arouse the same mysterious

expectancy and sense of coming evil which he had experienced then.

He tried to turn his thoughts from this painful retrospect, and spreading on the table before him the work which he had brought, set himself resolutely to his task. But unintelligible sentences flowed from his pen, and the image of Nadine persistently obtruded itself between his eyes and the page upon which they were bent; so that perforce he yielded to the mood of melancholy reverie which was creeping over him, and leaning back in his chair, lost himself in a train of reflection in which bitter regret over the past mingled with dread of the future, wonder how Nadine would greet him upon the morrow, and excited longing for the hour of meeting.

Midnight pealed forth from the turret clock. Roused by the chime, Bramwell started, heaved a regretful sigh, and again braced himself to his writing. The room felt chilly, for the fire had burned low. He rose to replenish it, and as he did so a timid knock sounded at his door. He waited for a second, doubtful. It was repeated, and the door pushed slightly ajar, while a voice which thrilled through his frame said very low,—

"It is I—Nadine."

Sick with the anticipation of some new evil, and yet hardly astonished,—for Nadine's actions could be predicted by no known rules governing human impulse,—Bramwell gave her admission; and she stood in his presence white and almost as terror-stricken as upon

the night to which his thoughts now involuntarily reverted.

She was dressed in a loose cashmere robe that, clinging to her form, displayed its outlines clearly. In an instant his practised intelligence had grasped her imminent need. His worst horror confronted him. She had come to him for aid in the direst extremity which can befall a woman.

He stood, almost as pale as she was, waiting for her to speak. Suddenly she divined that he knew her secret. A wave of crimson swept over her face. She advanced with drooped eyes, and said in an imperative whisper,—

"I want you to come at once to my room."

He bowed his head, and still without speaking followed her down the long dim

corridor till they turned into the west wing. Here she paused, and motioned him to enter a room the door of which stood partially open; then closed it behind them both and turned the key.

The chamber was in order; the fire burned brightly, the candles were lighted upon the dressing-table; a white camellia in a vase upon the mantel-piece appeared to have been placed there in readiness for her wearing. All kinds of daintinesses and expensive trifles were scattered about. He noticed these details even at this moment, for the stamp of Nadine's individuality seemed imprinted upon all. He shuddered as his eye caught the reflection of her haggard features in a pier glass opposite him. All the grace and sweetness of girlhood had fled from them.

She stood before him a desperate woman, threatened swiftly and suddenly by the most terrible danger.

"You see," she began in a hard, concentrated tone, "my doom has come upon me. You—*you* only can save me from a fate worse than death. If you will not save me I must kill myself. I cannot . . . I cannot . . . ." Her voice broke; she sank upon the ground at his feet and seized his hands. "What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned. "On all sides nothing but despair. I had come here with the thought that I would confess all to Mrs. Dormer; . . . but now—it is impossible. . . . And when I heard that you were near me,—in the house,—it was like a ray of light in blackness—like the clutch of a hand when

I was sinking. . . . I said to myself that you would not forsake me . . . . And you will not—you cannot?"

Her face was upturned to his in an agony of beseeching; tears rolled down her cheeks. He raised her gently, but with reproving firmness. There was in him no impulse to tenderness. Instead, a steel-like insensibility seemed to have crept over him, numbing all his capacity for emotion.

"I will not forsake you," he answered, very low. "Nadine, I will save you—if it be possible."

CHAPTER II.

DECEPTION.

About nine o'clock the following morning Harry Dormer, turning sleepily upon his pillow, received a message to the effect that Dr. Bramwell wished to speak to him immediately.

"Well, Doctor," was the greeting which Bramwell received as he entered his host's dressing-room, "what is up now? Your presence at Croxham seems invariably the harbinger of ill-luck. Have you come to break the news of some new tragedy? Out

with it. Let me hear the worst at once. Is any one dead, or dangerously ill?"

"You jump quickly at conclusions," answered Bramwell gravely. "It is true that I have some unpleasant news for you. No one is dead; but Miss Senguin is seriously ill."

"Nadine Senguin!" Harry Dormer started up in consternation. "All, I suppose, owing to the confounded carelessness of Deodatus Lumley. I wish I had seen him hanged before I let him drive my chestnut mare. Well, what has happened? My wife saw Miss Senguin last evening, and there did not appear to be anything greatly amiss. Has there been any alarming change? Were you called to her during the night?"

"Yes," answered Bramwell mechanically.

Harry Dormer's habit of rapid conjecture rendered his task comparatively easy. "The case was imperative. You will forgive me for assuming the responsibility of stringent measures. Miss Senguin has sustained a severe shock to the nervous system; and in the event of cerebral inflammation setting in, the worst results are to be feared. Absolute quiet is essential to her safety. I will not answer for the consequences if any one but the nurse or myself is allowed to enter her room. I have already secured from the village the services of Mrs. Gaythorne, in whom, as you know, I can place entire confidence."

"But—Dr. Hervey," said Mr. Dormer in a bewildered manner, "you will send for him and consult with him about the case, for I presume that you will not be able to remain in

attendance upon Miss Senguin. Is this out of the question? Pray consider, Bramwell, whether it is impossible for you to combine this with your London engagements; you would, by doing so, confer an inestimable boon upon us, and, I need not add, upon Nadine's father."

"I have already considered the matter," replied Bramwell with grave decision; "and if you will allow me, have determined to remain here. Both on account of my presence in the house, and of my friendship with the family, I think it well that I alone should have the care of Miss Senguin in this illness; I have been fortunate enough to win Mr. Senguin's good opinion, and he will more willingly confide his daughter's treatment to my discretion than to that of a comparatively

new acquaintance. I must insist upon his making no attempt to see her, and must beg you to help me in enforcing my prohibition."

"Willingly, Doctor," said Mr. Dormer, grasping Bramwell's hand. "Consider everyone in the house at your orders. You have taken a weight off my mind by deciding to remain. I have the most complete confidence in your skill and judgment, and in this can speak for Mrs. Dormer even more strongly than for myself, who fortunately have never had occasion to test your powers of healing. She has greater faith in you than in any one else in the world, morally and medically, I think I may say," added he with a smile. Bramwell's eyes drooped; his face flushed, then grew pale, and he turned away without uttering any acknowledgment of Mr. Dormer's

flattering speech. He stood for a few moments as if in inward debate, then said harshly and abruptly,—

"Though I cannot deny that imminent danger might be anticipated if my directions were not strictly carried out, I see at present no reason for consulting with Hervey. Should there arise any later, I will send for him. Pray do not alarm Mrs. Dormer. Assure her that I have every hope of Miss Senguin's speedy restoration. In the mean time, I will telegraph to London and make all necessary arrangements for my absence. I have already written to Mr. Senguin, and will send the letter by the early post. If you are writing, pray add force to my injunctions that he will refrain from exciting my patient by any attempt to see her."

Mr. Dormer readily promised, and Bramwell withdrew to his own room, where upon the table lay open the letter which, under the stress of Nadine's entreaties and the urgency of the situation, he had forced himself to write.

It ran thus:—

"*Croxham. November* 10*th*, 18—.

"My Dear Mr. Senguin,

"I grieve to tell you that a shock to the nervous system, due, it may be supposed, to an accident which took place in the hunting-field before my arrival here yesterday, has produced in Miss Senguin symptoms of cerebral inflammation which gives ground for grave anxiety, and demand the utmost care in her treatment, and in preserving the state of absolute quiet, upon which her safety mainly depends. Believe me that I sympathize deeply with the trouble of mind which this news will cause you; but must earnestly entreat that you will *on no account*

allow it to hurry you into a journey here, which, far from being of satisfaction to yourself or service to your daughter, could only increase your unhappiness, and would probably have the most injurious effect upon her state. My duty would compel me to forbid you access to her room, and any rumour of your presence in the house reaching her ears would probably rouse the excitement and agitation from which I am most anxious to guard her.

"Pray rely upon my unremitting care, and be assured that you will be kept well informed as to Miss Senguin's condition. I anticipate that if my directions are complied with, she will in a few days be out of danger, and I feel sure that I am only carrying out your wishes in taking upon myself the charge of her case, and have made such arrangements as will enable me to remain here as long as she requires constant attention.

"I am, sincerely yours,

"JULIAN BRAMWELL."

CHAPTER III.

FAREWELL.

Some two months later, Dr. Bramwell stood alone in the corridor of Mrs. Dormer's London house, listening with beating heart and mingled dread and anxiety for the sound of a footfall on the landing or the rustle of a dress upon the stair. The night before, he had received the following pencilled note from Nadine,—

"*We are in London for a day or two on our way to Italy. I wish much to see you. Come to-morrow between three and four.*"

Against his better judgment, Bramwell was here in obedience to the summons. The dainty room, notwithstanding its velvet hangings, luxurious furniture, and the fire burning in the grate, struck him with a feeling of chill and desolation. Without, a thick fog clung to the bare trees in the square; the pavement was wet; the houses opposite loomed dimly through mist; the street lamps burned dull; the cold was penetrating, and the gloom seemed palpable. A fit day upon which to bid Nadine farewell.

She was long in coming. Perhaps she too found the meeting difficult. Bramwell shivered, and, tired of waiting in suspense, began to pace nervously to and fro between the fire-place and the window. He regretted now that he had come. The horrible feeling

of mockery which had of late so often occurred to him in connection with Nadine oppressed him heavily at this moment. It was, to use his own simile, like the contrast between a dead, distorted face and a wreath of summer flowers crowning its brow. Nadine, his ideal woman, had ceased to exist. In her stead, memory presented an image inspiring a joyless, hybrid feeling, in which blended compassion, yearning, and vague loathing. He rebuked himself sternly for having yielded to her wish. Was he then but a weak coward—the slave of a woman's capricious impulses, without resolution to cut himself wholly adrift from her fate; incapable of facing a dreary future, without pausing to cast a regretful look backward at the past, and chafing under the burden of a

sacrifice which he had made fully counting the cost?

He was thus taking himself to task when the door was softly opened, and Nadine entered.

Something in her appearance—he could scarcely tell whether it were due to the black dress she wore, to her chastened mien, or to the extreme fragility of her face and figure —quelled the tumult within his breast and deepened the sensation of pity, while for the moment it banished completely that of repulsion. He advanced and took her passive hand in his; and as he did so, he marvelled at his own calmness. This very absence of compelling emotion made him realize the change in his mental attitude towards her. The sadness of the inevitable weighed him

down. Life seemed a gulf of horrible possibilities, in which, through the instrumentality of some malignant destiny against whose edicts it was vain to strive, the innocent were made guilty, the pure defiled.

Nadine met his pleading, sorrowful gaze for an instant, and a deep blush overspread her face; but it faded quickly, leaving her pale as snow. She motioned him to a seat, moving herself away to the window, and remaining there for a moment as though she were struggling to subdue her agitation. Presently she returned, and standing with her arms resting upon the back of a chair, said in pathetic tones that pierced his heart anew, while still they seemed to widen the spiritual distance between them,—

"I have grieved you very much. . . And

now, I don't want to make you more unhappy than I must do—I can see how you have suffered. And I too have suffered in a way that you could hardly understand. I do not expect that you will understand me. How should you, when I am a mystery to myself? After I had sent for you I was sorry, for I thought that to see you would be too painful. . . But you will let it be as little painful as is possible. I could not go away for a long while without telling you—without saying—"

A sob rose; she paused.

Bramwell had been sitting in an attitude of dejection, with head drooped and hands clasped between his knees. He spoke without lifting his eyes and in a constrained manner, which concealed how deeply he was moved.

"Do not tell me anything which it hurts you to say. There is no need. All my wish is that you should be spared in every way possible. There is so much suffering which is inevitable—which comes into our lot in spite of ourselves. The world is so full of it. . . . And you have had a long trial. It distresses me to see you looking still so pale and weak; you are not fit to bear agitation. If, without entering into matters, you would rely upon me—would trust me to make what arrangements I think best for your safety, your honour—much that troubles you at this moment would, I feel sure, be lifted from your mind. The future must appear to you a web of difficulties, immediate and distant. I cannot bear to think of you in your present state trying to cope with them. It would be

wisest not to look forward. After a few years your position may be more independent. Let *me* provide for the present."

Nadine fixed her eyes upon his face in mournful questioning, as though she longed with all her soul to follow his thoughts, yet could not by any possible effort discover their actual bent. The intensity of her gaze compelled his upward glance. She saw that the muscles of his face were quivering. Something in his eyes made the colour rise again to her cheek and brow. He seemed to divine and to answer her mute inquiry.

"Nadine," he said, "this is our farewell. After to-day we shall meet no more—in the way that we have met hitherto. To touch hands in conventional intercourse with the consciousness in our hearts of all that has

passed would be too terrible; and any closer friendship between us is impossible."

Nadine bent her head downwards till it touched her clasped hands. Suddenly she lifted her face, and looking away from him, said in a tone of passionate defiance,—

"Why impossible? You judge by the world's standard, after all. Am I so lost, so degraded, that I am unworthy to be called your friend? Am I any worse now than when—when I confessed everything to you at Kensington House, and you said—you offered to make me your wife?"

He did not answer. There was a painful pause. She continued, her voice changed by tears, and gradually sinking to a whisper,—

"Will you desert me now, when my great need is over, and I ask only your pity and

forbearance? I thought—I had been thinking—that by and by—after I have come back to England—though now I can hardly bear to meet your eyes—then we might be friends, and I might look to you for help as to a brother; and your knowledge would be my safeguard—my preservation from the bad that is in me. . . . This is what I most dread—the evil which is growing in my nature, corrupting it, poisoning all good impulses. There are horrible thoughts in my mind, sometimes they are more than I can endure, and I feel as though I must shriek or laugh, or prick myself with pins, anything to escape from them—the old thoughts—the old terror of myself. You see I must tell you everything, even though it should make you turn from me. . . . At first, when all was

over, there was an intense relief as of awakening from a dreadful nightmare; and I could only say to myself, 'I am saved,' and I could have gone on my knees and kissed your feet in my gratitude and thankfulness. But now that is past, and I cannot rest; I cannot breathe. There is a fire within me, a craving for excitement, a longing to act some new part, and always beside me an invisible demon whispering loathsome suggestions, crimes, horrors. . . . I have impulses to tell lies—cold, snake-like impulses—and the wish to destroy. There's no soft feeling in me, nothing womanly; no natural affection—only cruel hatred, and longing to get my own will, and to gain power, and to make others suffer."

He checked her by a sudden exclamation.

"I beseech you," he said in a shaken voice, "do not dwell upon these fancies. The very speaking of them strengthens their hold upon you. How can I convince you that they are utterly morbid and due entirely to your physical state?"

She shook her head.

"No, you must hear me out. There's something else I must say to you. I sent for you to-day to tell you." She leaned over to him and went on in a whisper. "*The little child* . . . . you know. I hated it from the first. I could not bear to see it. And now, though it is away from me, the hatred is stronger than ever. . . . I have a fancy sometimes that I hear it crying—and then it is as though a wild wicked spirit came into me and prompted me to take it away

and drown it in some deep pool, where its crying could never more be heard."

She shivered. He touched her hand; it was very cold. Mechanically he chafed it between his own; the action seemed to comfort her.

"This is not delirium?" she said, questioningly; "all that is past. I am quite well now."

He released her hand with a gesture of denial.

"You are far from well. I am deeply thankful that your father has decided upon leaving England. Your nerves are utterly unhinged, and if you remained here I should fear that you might have a serious illness."

She went on, following the former thread of thought,—

"I am afraid of what I might do. Sometimes the horror comes over me that if—Everything would be so easy if I knew where it was. I don't want to know. I want to be kept from it."

"You shall not know," said Bramwell earnestly. "You shall know nothing. And now you have told me what was in your mind, try to feel as though you had confessed to a priest and had received absolution. Try to think, now at least, that you have no burden —that I have taken it from you."

"It is for this that I have decided upon spending the next few years abroad," said Nadine, speaking with agitated hurry. "I wish to leave the past behind me. I wish to begin life anew—unshackled. And how could I do so with this hateful consciousness,

this miserable weight always dragging me down. You *must* help me to escape from it. Where else would be the use of all you have done for me? . . . And when I come home again everything may be different. *I* may be different. But if you forsake me—you do not know how in my thoughts I have clung to you—I shall grow wicked—mad. I shall become callous—and then there will be no hope for me. . . ."

As she ceased speaking she lifted her arms and let them fall despairingly, remaining a motionless figure, with parted lips and dilated eyes.

Bramwell rose and walked away a few paces. His former mood had been shaken. There was now no repulsion in his mind. In her power of swaying the emotions of those

with whom she was brought into relation lay the secret of Nadine's witchery. It seemed to Bramwell that she was less the victim of temptation, to which her own propensities placed her in subjection, than of a cruel fate, which had compelled circumstance. He stood battling with the storm of passion that swept him, as his thoughts turned to the dead man who had wrought this evil; and he clenched his hands in impotent rage and despair when he compared the miserable woman before him with the bright creature of a year back, who had travelled so swiftly from fearless girlhood to this region of tragic horror.

When he returned he saw that she had changed her position; and, with her hands clasped before her face, was crouching against the arm of a sofa.

"You must not give way to these feelings," he said in deep, passionate tones. "You *must not! you must not!* Try to look upon them as a form of disease, not as the outcome of your real nature. Your existence has been shaken, as it were, to its core. Your whole being has been paralyzed by the most terrible of experiences, and you have passed a crisis which might well have unhinged the strongest brain. I have great hope in the effect upon you of new scenes and fresh occupations. Soon there will be nothing in your surroundings to recall the past; gradually these miserable fancies which torture you now will leave you; and as you grow stronger your mind will regain its original balance. Your trouble has come to you in youth; and though its effect must always remain, its

worst bitterness will pass away. But this constant self-analysis and morbid introspection can only do you harm. Put forth all your strength and courage to face the demons you dread, and to keep them at arm's length. Encourage all occupation which tends to moral health. Live, but do not think. Interest yourself in abstract things, in books, music, art. Try to cultivate some pursuit which will enlarge your sympathies and lift you above melancholy brooding. Above all, cultivate human affection, not in the sense of love, but the affection of ordinary daily life. This will be your truest safeguard—" He paused, and added with a bitter, impatient gesture—"I am talking to you like a priest. My words seem to myself now utter mockery, unmeaning platitudes.

I dare say they seem so to you. But perhaps you will think of them by and by, and they may do you good."

"You do not understand," answered Nadine wearily, letting her hands fall upon her lap. "None of these things would ever take any hold upon me. I cannot be fond of people; it is not my nature. The feeling of pleasure in being admired is all that I have ever known of affection—except in two instances—"

She was silent; her face softened; her eyes seemed to lose themselves in backward visions.

"I have *loved* one person only in the world. Ah me! *That* fire is burned out for ever. . . . And I have cared—I do care—for *you*. You are all that is left me now—yet you will forsake me."

"Nadine," cried Bramwell, urged beyond

all power of self-restraint, "you ask too much of me. You ask more than human nature is capable of. To act a lie for your sake; to save you at the peril of my professional reputation; to guard you from disgrace; to take upon my shoulders the burden you fling aside—this I have done and will do faithfully. But to be your friend and companion; to listen to your confidences and self-upbraidings; to watch you play your part in society, as you can so well play it; to prescribe for your mental health, knowing your secret; to feel my love for you intensifying daily to madness, realizing even more strongly that there lies between us a gulf that cannot be passed—this is more than I could bear."

Nadine bent towards him, smiling with ineffable sweetness.

"Then you love me," she whispered softly—"*still?*"

"Why will you torture me?" cried Bramwell passionately. "No; I do not love you—not as I once did. I don't know what I feel. I cannot understand myself. A blight has fallen upon me; life is sickening. I am more wretched than words can express. To me this condition is moral death, and my only hope lies in shunning you."

"Do not reproach me," said Nadine. "Remember that from the first I bade you leave me. Remember that when you offered to make me your wife, knowing all, I refused to accept the sacrifice. . . . You do not love me—is this so?"

She placed her hand upon his arm and forced his miserable eyes to meet

hers, which were melting with womanly softness.

"Nadine," he cried, and held out his arms.

But she repulsed him gently and drew back.

"No," she said sadly; "there shall at least be one crime with which you will have no cause to reproach me. Think, if it will lighten your pain, that at the last I was touched by your goodness, your nobility, and that I regretted—that if I could, I would have made you happy. Think of me as the old impulsive Nadine, who knew herself, but who for once did not yield to an impulse which would bring you sorrow; for we should only bring each other sorrow, of that I am sure in my heart. Though I cling to you, for I cannot bear to let you go, I know that we

are best apart. I must go my way; I must fulfil my bent. You remember what I said always—'My nature is my destiny.' You in time might become a shackle that I should hate."

"Nadine," said Bramwell hoarsely, "let this be a new birth, as it were, a baptism in which you will be cleansed from all former associations. If you would accept and *believe* in your capacity for goodness—if you would make that belief a starting point— Nadine, I have faith in your youth—I have faith in the power of time. It *is* best that we should be apart. But our hearts and minds may grow more purely towards each other. . . . If it is ever any comfort to you to write to me you will do so?"

"Yes," said Nadine, in a mechanical man-

ner, "I will write sometimes. But it will not comfort me for long. We shall drift further and further away from each other. . . . I shall grow hard, as I said, and then writing to you will be of no use—nothing will be of any use."

She had risen; and he too stood up, clasping both her hands. At the sight of his sorrowful eyes, big with tears, a pang of sorrow and remorse pierced her, and she added tremulously—

"I grieve you, and I am not worth grieving for. I have done you nothing but harm. I have spoiled your life. . . . I have caused you the worst pain. . . . And now, what can I do to atone?—nothing, nothing. I will try, indeed I will try, to be better —for your sake."

Bramwell could not speak. The anguish of the moment was intolerable. He lifted Nadine's hands and held them against his breast; then stooped forward and kissed her cheek.

Tears fell from Nadine's eyes, and repressed sobs shook her frame. He loosed her hands, and she sank back upon the couch, burying her face in the cushions.

"I can't—say—any more," she murmured brokenly. "I said—that I would try. I will be better. You have been very good to me. I do not see now how you can ever feel anything but regret for having known me—but perhaps some day you may be less sorry."

He left her without another word.

BOOK VI.

LETTER I.

FROM NADINE SENGUIN TO DR. BRAMWELL.

"*Villa Alexia, Nice,*

"*January 18th, 18—*

"IT is two years since I have written to you. I could not answer your last letter. There was in its tone an indefinable something which told me that it had cost you an effort to write. Is not this true?—and the solicitude which you expressed for me was so out of harmony with my mood and my manner of life, that it irritated instead of softening me, and goaded me to excitement as a stronghold from thought.

"Did I not say that this would be the case; and that as time went on, and I grew harder and colder, we should, in a spiritual sense, drift further and further apart? You will gradually get to think my reliance upon you a distasteful burden, and I shall feel less and less the need of you.

"But to-night I have a powerful impulse towards you. The sense of your presence is so strong within me, that once or twice I had almost turned in the expectation of meeting your sad eyes. Strange, if after all I should be more faithful to my sentiment for you than you to yours for me! Is not there some spiritual sort of electricity which upon occasions forces souls to speak to each other through darkness and space?

"Not that for me there is at this moment any tragic necessity for such communion. I hardly know what has turned my thoughts towards you so vividly, unless it be that you

formed the subject of conversation with some people in whose company I dined this evening. Their name is Blundell. They are mother and daughter, and appear to know you intimately. I wonder if you are deeply interested in them. I wonder if the mother deceives you into believing her true; we false women have intuitions concerning each other, and they are generally correct. I wonder— Something that was said this evening set my mind working. Mrs. Blundell is a woman of the world—the world of Monte Carlo. This means that she is an inveterate gambler, of straitened means, who, with an affected devotion to her daughter, would sell her to the highest bidder. The girl is lovely, sweet, and gentle. Her face brightened strangely as we walked in the garden after dinner and talked—of you. It pleased me to lead her on. I wanted to hear of your success, of your mode of life. I wanted to try and

glean whether you had changed. Perhaps there was a little womanly pique, a taint of jealousy at the bottom of my interest. Do you recognize Nadine? *Have* you changed? Do you ever think of marrying, or are you still wedded to science—or to memory?

"Men have less to repine at in their lot than we women in ours. To you love and marriage are mere episodes; to us they are the supreme crisis, the refuge from dissatisfaction and despair, the passport to independence, the means to some definite aim in life. Ah me! do you recollect the advice you urged upon me when we said farewell to each other three years ago? You bade me cultivate a healthy interest in abstract things—in books, music, art, above all, to cultivate affection. You said that I might think of your words some day. I have often thought of them, and of many others that you have spoken. But I have profited

nothing by your counsel. Books have meant for me only self-loathing, the hateful presentment of my own mood and passions; music, indefinable sadness, from which I would fain escape; art, the conventional jargon of a certain school—false, narrow rules applied to drapery and colouring, afternoon teas in æsthetic studios at Rome and Florence; and affection! vanity, display, greed for power, and sordid effort to outvie other women in the number of my admirers, or by the achievement of a brilliant marriage.

"It is a relief to me to open my heart in this vague way; and you will understand my impulsive candour, and will take it for what it is—the fancy of the hour. You perhaps alone can realize the moral nausea which at times even still overpowers me. It comes over me at moments when I appear in the gayest spirits; when I am dancing, dressing, driving, when men are paying court to me;

and for the moment I feel miserable enough to go forth and drown myself, like the lost wretch that I am. But this sickening feeling does not last long; and for the keen pain which I once endured excitement has proved an effectual anodyne. I have no capacity for pain now save of the egoistic kind, nor am I tortured any longer by a sense of inward conflict. The seven devils have entered victoriously in and hold the sanctuary. Who shall cast them forth? Even you, in your deepest and most earnest mood, would have no power to awaken in me emotion of any nobler kind than that artificial sentimentality which fashion prescribes as becoming to a pair of intense eyes and a Burne Jones type of countenance.

"Do you know that restless stirring of the soul, that craving for sympathy which constrains us imperiously, even when we are

most self-contained, and believe ourselves most entirely self-sufficing?

"I paused here. It is a wild night. The mistral is blowing, and the surf is beating on the shore. To me it feels oppressively sultry. I have been wandering in the garden among the eucalyptus trees and the fragrant yellow laden mimosa shrubs. Are you fond of this place? Can you conceive the infinite beauty of this landscape, and the sweetness and loneliness of such a southern night—the open stretch of sea gleaming pale beneath a watery moon; the dim background of hills; and the distant, steadfast light of the beacon at Antibes, which in some strange way brings to the heart a sense of rest and anchorage; the murmuring of insects and whispering of the eucalyptus leaves; the perfume of flowers and indescribable freshness of the atmosphere? We are fools to seek sympathy

from humanity when nature has such wealth to offer; but in the case of temperaments like mine—restless, capricious, tumultuous to-day, composed to-morrow, at peace never—nature has less power to soothe than the garish scenes in which I have of late taken part.

"I am quieter. The air has done me good; my head aches less wearily. And now, my friend,—may I not call you so upon this page?—I have news for you. To-night I have decided my destiny.

"Congratulate me. It promises at least to be brilliant—one upon which Mammon must smile; and though angels may weep, the hosts of earth and hell will applaud.

"What are the good things which mothers of the world covet most earnestly for their daughters, and that women such as I yearn after? A title, a vast rent-roll, a lineage almost royal, palaces, equipages, diamonds that a queen might envy, a life

of luxury and constant excitement—and all burdened with but the honourable condition —marriage.

"Well, this evening I consented to become the wife of Prince Nicolaivitch Titchakoff.

"You may have heard his name. Do you know that it ranks but little lower than that of the Imperial House? Do you know that his wealth is almost fabulous; that he has territories in Russia, a palace in Rome, a villa in Cannes, an hotel in Paris, an estate in Warwickshire inherited from his mother, who was an English heiress, a Scotch forest, and a mansion in Park Lane; that his jewels are world-renowned; that his taste is considered the most fastidious in Europe; that his manners are exquisite; that for years he has been the despair of chaperones, and that court beauties have sighed at his feet in vain? Could the soul of woman desire more? What matter that he has been twice

married; that he is of middle age; that he has the reputation of a Bluebeard and a voluptuary; that mystery surrounds him; that he is called cruel and cold-blooded, and is said to have a passion for dangerous excitement and political intrigue; that there are in his castle locked chambers to which the outside world may not penetrate?

"Oh, for any source of excitement which should make life seem momentous! Are there not, in my castle locked chambers also?

"Ah! in these days of cheap cynicism and difficult morality, when life is like a solemn farce enacted behind the footlights to an appropriate orchestral accompaniment, it is so easy to talk and write flippantly; but the drop scene must fall sometimes; and there are interludes in the drama when memory awakes with tears, and the heart communes silently with its own bitterness.

"In obedience to the higher law which imposes an especial creed upon the Princesses Titchakoff, I enter, upon my marriage, into the Greek Church. It is expedient that one should bow in the house of Rimmon; and of what importance can a slight change of ritual be to me, for whom the name of God bears little or no meaning?

"If it were otherwise—if I could feel any confident anticipation of a future in which the errors of this world might be repaired and its sins atoned for—I might perhaps struggle towards a different future. But my religion is dead, and it is you, strangely enough, who have killed it—you who at one time stirred all the impulses towards higher living which lay in my nature.

"This being so, why should I strive after a vain ideal, an impossible duty? Life being all that I have, why should I not clutch at the best which it can give? why not halt at

every green place that presents itself in this dreary desert?

"Farewell, my friend. This is indeed farewell. Henceforth you and I can have no interest in common.

"NADINE."

The letter enclosed a cheque for a large sum drawn in favour of Dr. Bramwell for the benefit of his ward, Evelyn Gage.

LETTER II.

Written some three years after the marriage of Nadine Senguin to Prince Titchakoff.

FROM DR. BRAMWELL TO MRS. BLUNDELL.

"*Great Cumberland Place,*

"*June 12th, 18—*

"MY DEAR MRS. BLUNDELL,

"I am deeply sorry that you renew in your letter, which I have just received, your refusal to let me see your daughter, and in person press my suit.

"I was under the impression, after our interview yesterday, that your confidence in me had been restored, and that I had sufficiently relieved your mind upon the subject

of certain circumstances in my life which appear to have awakened your distrust. I can only again solemnly assure you that, unworthy as I in many ways feel myself of the love of a girl sweet and innocent as your Margaret, there is no reason such as you hint at to debar me from asking her to be my wife, or from honourably introducing her under the same roof with my ward, Evelyn Gage.

"I gather from your letter, that remarks incautiously dropped by Mrs. Gaythorne have re-aroused your suspicions as to my relationship to Evelyn. I do not deny that the child's parentage is a secret which I am pledged not to divulge; but I do distinctly deny that I am her father, or that I have been actuated by any but the purest motives in becoming her guardian.

"You state positively that this denial does not remove your scruples or induce you to consent that I should pay my addresses to

your daughter. Forgive me for venturing to express a doubt whether, in the case of a suitor more highly placed in the scale of society than I, these delicate scruples would be so firmly put forward. I can well understand your wish that Margaret should marry a man younger, richer, less absorbed in grave pursuits, and of higher rank than myself—all these disadvantages I feel strongly; but, and I write in all humility, I question greatly whether any other marriage would equally promote her happiness.

"You know that I should never have been emboldened to speak but for the revelation of feeling which in her delirium Margaret so innocently made. Even then I hesitated, and the time when I avoided going to your house was passed in convincing myself that I should be doing her no wrong in making her my wife. I do not wish to conceal from you that my earlier life was sacrificed to a hopeless

infatuation, and that the love which I have now to offer is not the passion of youth, but the earnest affection of a prematurely aged and somewhat disappointed man, who feels that the tenderest care and devotion is inadequate for the priceless treasure of such a heart as Margaret's.

"But these I offer in the deepest reverence and sincerity, and with no shadow of shame. Since you *demand* the full disclosure of Evelyn's parentage, I will if possible satisfy you, and will try to obtain a release from my vow of silence. But if this is denied me, though I have little hope that Margaret will ever act in defiance of your influence, I claim it as my right that she shall be permitted to hear my pleading and herself decide my fate.

"I am,

"Sincerely yours,

"JULIAN BRAMWELL."

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER I.

A DAUGHTER OF MAMMON.

In the boudoir of one of the larger houses in Park Lane the Princess Titchakoff and her friend Margaret Blundell were seated, engaged in intimate conversation.

If misery still dogged Nadine, and life yet appeared to her no more than a hollow farce, her beauty showed no sign of deterioration; and only her eyes spoke of weariness and dissatisfaction with her lot. Her complexion exhibited a more delicate bloom

than even of old; in her gestures there was the same languid vivacity; her lips seemed to have been trained to smiles; and though in her features and mien the expression of forced sweetness and of conscious power had perhaps deepened to artificiality, it did not detract from the fascination which must always be her ruling characteristic.

A more decided contrast to the Princess's beauty than that of her companion could hardly be imagined. The madonna-like loveliness of Margaret Blundell's face, though it would have shown to greater advantage upon a form less slight and more perfectly moulded, might have gained for her a perhaps purer admiration and more lasting influence than that which Nadine inspired. Her large grey eyes shone with a light that

seemed more of heaven than of earth; her lips and brow bore the stamp of tender sincerity and confiding innocence; her whole presence breathed womanliness; and if the curves of her mouth and chin faintly suggested irresolution and undue susceptibility to the influence of affection, the fault was amply redeemed by the angelic sweetness of her glance and the noble pose of her head.

She was seated now in a low chair by the Princess's side, and in a caressing manner was stroking the hand of her friend. There was something childlike and singularly engaging in all her actions.

"Dear Princess," she said affectionately, "you are certainly thinner than you used to be in Rome, and there are darker shadows under your eyes. Are you quite well?"

"Quite well, little one," answered Nadine listlessly; "but we stayed in Paris on our way here, and late hours tell upon me a little. Perfect health is the curse of narrow lives like mine. Think what a fund of excitement I might find in studying my various symptoms, and experimentalizing with quack medicines upon my nervous system. I was reading in some book the other day that, apart from dress, society, and lovers, the only things which vitally affect fashionable women are spiritualism and the confessional. A chronic malady is worth all these distractions of the flesh and the devil."

"You call your life narrow," said Margaret. "I should have imagined it a ceaseless round of amusement and occupation; and yet—" she hesitated slightly—"I have

noticed that, in spite of your gaiety, you always seem sad. Is it that vague melancholy, I wonder, which makes you so attractive? Why are we always most charmed by that which is saddest? Does nothing interest you, Princess?"

"Yes, a thousand things—as much as blowing bubbles in the air and watching them burst."

Nadine paused and leaned forward, resting her chin upon her hand; then lifting her head impatiently, she continued, with that curious impulsiveness which often showed itself in strong contrast with the usual indifferent reserve of her manner—

"Frankly, I need a big excitement to stir my blood. Gambling would perhaps drag me out of myself if it were not a matter

of supreme unimportance whether I should win or lose. One must have staked one's all before passion can be roused or an issue seem momentous, and then—then. . . . In order that one's faculties should be completely absorbed, desperation must be the goad to interest; honour, position, life must rest upon the fall of the card. . . Oh, that I had lived in the old days when the world was not too enlightened for enthusiasm: I could have led a forlorn hope, or struck a fell blow for my country's freedom. I could have been a Judith, a Catherine of Russia, a Charlotte Corday. But in these days, when ambition means for women degrading intrigue, treachery, conspiracy, dynamite, we had better all be patient Grizzels or frivolous puppets."

Margaret looked bewildered.

"I am surprised, Princess," she said, "to hear you speak so scornfully of political movements. At Rome I have seen you kindle with excitement when you discussed these matters with the statesmen and authors and leaders of great causes who assembled in your salon. It fascinated me to watch your face when you mourned the oppressions of Italy and of Russia. And it is said that Prince Titchakoff is so keenly interested in the troubles of his country."

Nadine started, and eyed the young girl keenly.

"Well, perhaps some day you may hear that I have plunged into—what shall I say?—the whirlpool of Nihilism as a refuge from ennui. But tell me of yourself, Margaret. What have you been doing during the last two

years? It is strange that we did not meet abroad during the winter. Does your mother still take annual flight with the swallows? and do you submit as patiently as ever to being dragged the weary round which fashion ordains for a young lady who wishes to achieve a decent settlement in life?"

"Princess, you make me unhappy when you speak so cynically. It *is* a weary round. I detest it. But though you say that the world has grown supine, and that there is no nobility in men, surely we know some lives which are devoted to ennobling pursuits —to science, the benefit of humanity. How blessed a woman might feel herself if it were her privilege to merge her existence in one of these."

Margaret's voice trembled, and a vivid

blush overspread her cheeks. The Princess raised the girl's face, and forced the grey eyes to meet her own.

"*Science!*" she repeated in a tone of mournful raillery. "In that word lies the key to your discontent with woman's ordinary lot. Margaret, do you remember *who* we talked of most the evening that I first met you at Nice?"

"You bewitched me then, Princess," murmured Margaret. "And at Rome I felt all the time that, half against my will, you were worming my secrets out of me. But I had no secrets that I was ashamed of. I have none now."

"Women are only ashamed to own that they love when they love unworthily," said Nadine.

"Ah, Princess!" exclaimed Margaret, "there spoke the nobility of your nature. But you have not quite understood me. It was not *love*," she added hesitatingly. "It was pity, admiration, reverence—the feeling which an ignorant child may have for one older, sadder, wiser, and infinitely better than herself."

"And since that time the child's feeling has ripened into the woman's affection? . . . And it is returned?"

"Do not ask me. Indeed I cannot tell you."

"I *must* know," said Nadine imperiously. "Confide in me freely. I—I am interested in you and in him. Speak, Margaret. Has he asked you to be his wife?"

"No—that is—he—"

"But you are certain that he loves you?"

"No—yes," faltered Margaret; "not in *that* way. Princess, you do not understand. Marriage was not in my thoughts. How should it have been? He always seemed to me a man set apart—by his love for his profession—by some sorrow which I felt must have overshadowed his early life. His friendship—to be allowed to sympathize with his aims—to have the joy of knowing that there lives in the world at least one man absolutely truthful, unselfish, and loyal—seems to me sufficient to make life happy. Were it not for that complete faith in him and in the purity of my feeling, I could blush when I think of— I was very ill, Princess, in the winter. I had a fever; and I fear—I have never dared to ask my mother whether in my delirium I betrayed how deep is my feeling

for him. But he would not misconstrue words spoken so innocently. That is my comfort. . . . . He was very good to me while I was weak and suffering, more tender to me than even my mother, if that could be possible. And when I began to get better, and was feverish and restless, he was so patient—so pitiful. He would sit looking at me with sad, earnest eyes; his face so grave, but oh! so kind; and once—he bent over me and kissed my forehead, and bade me grow strong for his sake. I was very happy. It was like the revelation of something I had dreamed, but had never dared picture to myself. Then for a long time he did not come to see me, and I was afraid lest perhaps I had grieved him. . . . But last week we met again; and though he said little, I felt in

some strange way that I was dear to him, and that he understood. But I have seen him no more since; and when I asked my mother if he had been to her, she reproached me for want of faith in her, and said that I must wait patiently till she had satisfied herself that he was worthy of me. Worthy of *me!* I am not afraid, Princess. I can trust my mother, but I can trust him implicitly also. You, who knew him long ago, tell me, am I not justified in my confidence?"

For a moment the Princess did not answer. She had turned away while Margaret spoke, and was gazing vacantly at a stand of flowers which stood in the window. A curious smile, half-mocking, half-melancholy, played about her lips.

"*I* am the last person to whom you should

appeal," she answered, in a tone of repressed energy which invested her words with deeper meaning than they would naturally have conveyed. "It is impossible," she continued excitedly, "for a woman to judge accurately of any man's nature. Perhaps once in a lifetime we may imagine, as you now do, Margaret, that we have realized a long-dreamed-of ideal, and have discovered in the flesh perfect truth, perfect loyalty, perfect *constancy*—" The emphasis upon the last word was intensely bitter. "This belief may have been our anchor in stormy seas, where otherwise we might have perished. You little know what safeguard there lies to a desperate woman in the conviction that she is loved purely, unchangeably by a man whom she feels is capable of the highest devotion,

the sternest renunciation. She would die rather than sacrifice him to herself. . . . . His love is her religion; it is to her the symbol of all good. It represents faith and virtue in a world that seems to her a sink of vice. But when that love fails her, when she finds that it was worth no more than the base, ephemeral passions which are sighed daily at her feet—where then would be the motive for striving to rise above the level of her nature? Cynicism would be her justification. There might be excitement in giving play to despicable passions, even if she were actuated alone by selfish greed of power. That sort of distraction would be her moral opium."

Nadine rose hurriedly and walked towards a pier-glass, where she stood apparently lost in contemplation of her own beauty.

Margaret could not see her face, but silently watched her attitude with eyes in which bewilderment mingled with fascination.

Suddenly Nadine turned, and exclaimed impulsively,—

"There are people who rouse in me all that is at once best and worst."

As she spoke the door opened, and a servant came in bearing a card upon a salver.

The Princess glanced at it, and ordered that the visitor should be admitted.

"Margaret," she said calmly, "an old friend has come to call upon me. You will be surprised to hear that it is Dr. Bramwell."

Margaret started to her feet in a state of painful confusion.

"Princess, I cannot see him now. Let me leave you before he enters."

"Too late," said Nadine imperiously; "but you may go presently if you will. Better do so," she added with a forced laugh; "your presence might be a check upon confidences. It is a drawing-room drama, full of curious situations. This is a scene for which we ought to pose theatrically."

She approached Margaret, but the latter drew back.

"Princess, your manner is so strange. You almost make me fancy that——"

She paused abruptly. Dr. Bramwell was announced.

A swift, indefinable change swept over Nadine's features. It might have been likened to that sudden subsidence of irritation which

takes place in a certain species of serpent the moment before it makes the fatal spring. Her lips parted in a winning smile, her eyes beamed alluringly, the muscles about her mouth relaxed, and dimples came into play. She extended her hand in a gesture of the most perfect grace and courtesy, with which there yet blended the faint reflection of her old thirst for admiration.

For a second Bramwell stood, his gaze rivetted upon her face. A little extra paleness, and the tension of his brow and nostrils were the only signs which betrayed inward agitation. But these were clearly perceived by Nadine. Triumphant resolve took possession of her; it was like the whetting of a keen and dangerous weapon. As he took her hand their eyes met, and mutual

consciousness seemed to establish a magnetic current between them. The old dynamic force of her look asserted itself irresistibly. Why should he struggle against a fascination stronger than his will? All thoughts of his later love were for the moment swept away. His pulses throbbed wildly. . . . Was not this Nadine—the dream of his youth, the only woman whose glance had ever stirred his blood to madness; about whose very name there yet clung a subtle magic; whose smile and touch had still the power to intoxicate; whose tones thrilled his being as the echo of a war-song, which had once moved a nation to revolt, might set the nerves of a patriot quivering long after the passionate struggle was ended?

"Dr. Bramwell," said the Princess, "this

is indeed a pleasure. In the years that have passed since we were friends—at Alston—I have thought of you many times, and have rejoiced to hear of the fame that you have won. My father remembered you till the last, and spoke often gratefully of your care and kindness in the old days. But—it is so long since I have heard from you—I feared that you had forgotten me, and that we were never to meet again."

"With what platitude can I answer you, Princess?" said Bramwell, recovering himself. "Shall I say that to forget you would be an impossibility? Our lives have lain apart."

"True. I have been so little in England of late years. And our paths are likely to be still more widely separated if my husband

carries out his threatened intention of taking me to Russia. But there *has* been a link between us, Dr. Bramwell. In Rome, two winters ago, Miss Blundell and I often talked of you. Indeed, the mention of your name first created a bond of sympathy between us. Was it not so, Margaret?"

Bramwell started as his eyes followed those of the Princess and rested upon Margaret Blundell, who, her head bent in ostensible examination of a water-colour sketch, was standing at a table some little distance apart. Her presence intensified the conflict of emotions which his meeting with Nadine had aroused, and plunged him into a state of consciousness at once keen and unreal—so often the accompaniment of a vivid dream that all the time we are aware is only a dream.

Had he not often in the night watches pictured himself face to face with these two women—Nadine the enchantress, Margaret the pure, the dove-eyed, who, could he shake himself free from the old witchery, might be the lamp of his home, the sustaining joy of his life.

Though he felt in a vague manner that the crisis was momentous, he was yet wholly incapable of realizing the full tragic import of the situation. The drama was inward; its issue depended upon himself; his own nature was the arbiter of his fate. Swift images in connection with Nadine, of rapture, doubt, despair, repulsion, succeeded each other in his mind, and with them in some dim way blended an intuition of need on her part.

If she required him, could he desert her?

The dream-like sense deepened. He had a feeling, bewildering yet not painful, of being borne on without any consciousness of volition, and of watching his life outside him, having no power to regulate it. And with the wonderful contradictoriness of human nature he experienced for the moment a distinct satisfaction in this inability to sway his mood. It lulled the pangs of compunction and relieved the pressure of responsibility.

But Margaret's pure eyes as they met his infused new strength into his soul. The fresh emotions which her influence sent streaming through his being were like the beginning of another existence—an existence in which Nadine must always stand apart, solitary—invested with a glamour that could never in his eyes enshrine another woman;

but, most of all, apart from that one with whom his own lot would be blended in a blessedness that yet must ever be half mournful.

Margaret's touch when she mechanically returned his greeting seemed to him that of a miraculous hand. He felt that the crisis had passed, and saw his fate decided—but saw it through a vista of present pain.

Margaret advanced in an agitated manner towards Nadine.

"Princess," she said tremulously, "it is time that I went away. I will bid you good-bye."

Nadine drew the young girl to her side and kissed her lips. At the contact Margaret recoiled ever so slightly, and Nadine's eyes met those of Bramwell for an instant, flashing at him a glance of passionate inquiry.

"Good-bye," said the Princess; "but not for long. In a few days we shall meet again."

Bramwell held open the door as Margaret passed through. Their hands and eyes met again. In her look there was holy trust; in his mournful entreaty.

"I shall see you very soon," he whispered.

His gaze followed her till she had disappeared from the outer room.

CHAPTER II.

THE WEAPON TURNED.

When Bramwell turned he saw that Nadine was still standing. She took his hand, and with a gesture inexpressibly winning motioned him to a chair. Then sinking upon a low settee by his side she leaned forward, and resting her chin upon her hand, gazed at him earnestly.

"And now, old friend," she said—and who but Nadine had at command tones so thrilling?—"tell me—have I changed?"

"Changed! *You!* How, Princess?" he stammered.

"Do not call me '*Princess*,'" she exclaimed with mournful imperiousness, scornfully accentuating the word. "Can I not forget what I am, if only for an hour? Let me be Nadine—the Nadine of Alston, the Nadine whom you once *loved*."

Their eyes met. Hers had grown larger in their intensity, and were melting with tenderness. She had suffered her voicé to drop almost to a whisper. Her accent conveyed maddening possibilities, the thought of which, against will and judgment, fired his blood. He could have flung himself at her feet, clasping her hands. . . . But Margaret's presence still haunted the room; the remembrance of Margaret's touch, like that of a guardian spirit, restrained him from impetuous avowal, which a second later must have

turned to bitter self-upbraiding. Nadine watched the struggle. . . . At last she saw his face set into sorrowful sternness, almost despairing resolution. With consummate tact, allowing him no time to reply, she continued,—

"I dream impossibilities. Nadine is no more. The Princess Titchakoff reigns in her stead—reigns, suffers, weeps. . . . Ah, me! But dreaming is pleasant; and I have a means which is very simple, very painless, for escaping to another world when I am weary of this. Sometimes in my fancy I paint my lot as it might have been—a lot wedded to high purposes, warmed by unselfish devotion, in which the faint germ of nobility that lay in me might have been converted by the faith and encouragement

of another into a sustaining principle. . . . Träumerei! Ah, do you remember? Do you remember the drawing-room at Alston, the dim light, the scent of the *potpourri*, the quaint, carved chairs, and the old man leaning back, with the firelight upon his face, making it glorious? Even he has gone from me. In all these years I have had but one friend, which has been a refuge from self, which has comforted me in hours of misery, which has made memory reality."

"Who? *What?*" asked Bramwell eagerly, a chill fear striking him.

"You are so wise in your craft, and yet you cannot read my face? But you used to say that when *I* was in question you were but a poor physician. . . . Nay, ask me no more. Let us imagine that we are in the drawing-

room at Alston. Shall I play to you again?"

She rose abruptly and moved to the open piano opposite. For some minutes her fingers wandered among the keys, breathing the old plaintive harmonies that had echoed so many times in his dreams. Present thoughts and past moods seemed to take form and troop in poetic images, phantasmagoria-fashion, before him, saddening, yet at the same time thrilling him with suggestions of what might have been. Suddenly Nadine struck a minor accompaniment, and sang with indescribable pathos the following sonnet,—

"What's the best thing in the world?
June rose by May dew impearled;
Sweet south wind that means no rain;
Truth not cruel to a friend;
Pleasure not in haste to end:
Beauty not self-decked and curled

Till its pride is over plain;
Light that never makes you wink;
Memory that gives no pain;
Love—when *so* you've loved again.
What's the best thing in the world?
Something out of it, I think."

Her voice trembled; her hands fell upon her lap, and she sat for a moment quite still. Then returning to her seat, she cast herself back against the cushions in an attitude of weariness and *abandon*. Her bosom heaved gently. Tears beaded her drooping lashes. He saw that she was hardly mistress of herself.

The spell of the music still held Bramwell in thrall. He stooped over her.

"Nadine," he said in a voice of anguish. "It breaks my heart to see you so unhappy."

Nadine did not answer at once. Their

looks clung to each other, and the sadness of her face was intensified in his. She smiled strangely and shook her head.

"I am not often like this—only sometimes, when I am alone and unnerved. . . . Still impulsive, you see, still emotional, still double in nature, still compelled to sincerity —by *you*. . . . I am not so greatly changed. Unhappy!" she exclaimed impetuously. "Ah! if you could but know the wretchedness, the sickening disgust that lies beneath this mask of prosperity. There are things in my life which I would tell you if I could. But I cannot—I dare not. . . . Picture me—Nadine, who was once so proud, so self-confident—a victim, a tool, a slave to jealousy, tyranny that I loathe, smiled upon in society, gibed at, threatened, insulted at home, tread-

ing always upon a mine which at any moment may explode and destroy me."

"Nadine," cried Bramwell, startled, "it is difficult to understand what you mean. It is more than hard to know that I cannot help you. I can only imagine vaguely what your life is. . . . I have heard rumours. Your husband is perhaps involved in the great political movements abroad. You shrink from possible consequences—"

"No, not alone that," answered Nadine recklessly. "There would be excitement in danger if only I could feel that for me there were any vital interest at stake. But all is empty and barren. What is it to me if an emperor lives or dies, if a few human lives more or less are sacrificed? I have no large abstract sympathies, no deep passions. I

thought once that I could find satisfaction in the gratification of vanity and ambition. I was mistaken. I have tried — yes, let me confess it—to lower myself to coarse pleasures. I cannot; and sometimes," she added with a bitter laugh, "I am tempted, like Madame de Sevigné, to regret that I am so cold. There are no sources of distraction for me. But it is like the old days to see your face sadden while I talk of what is in my mind. And I was selfish always in grieving you. I have not yet lost the power of causing you pain."

"Nadine," said Bramwell impulsively, "*you* are the abiding wretchedness of my life."

She raised herself and leaned towards him, her face upturned to his.

"*Must* I be so—always? I want to tell you something. You remember when we parted. You might have made me what you pleased if you had not chosen to forsake me. If I had thought less of you and more of myself—"

He interrupted her by a passionate gesture. She drew back and watched him anxiously, waiting for him to speak. His attitude—that habitual to him when deeply moved or in inward debate, of head bent forward, face lowered, and hands tightly clasped together—told her that he was struggling with either impulse or agitation. She saw that the muscles of his forehead were contracted, and that his lips were sternly locked. . . . How long he remained silent! . . . Would he never look at her?

The silence continued, to Bramwell made momentous by the pressure of mysterious necessity, growing every instant more imperative. The feeling of unreality and of being hurried onward by forces beyond his control had left him. His mind was vividly alert, capable even of self-analysis; and though the rapid probing of his inmost feelings inflicted the keenest suffering, he was in that state of mixed, remorseful consciousness when pain as the consequence—nay, even the justification of definite resolve—seemed welcome. He had at this moment none of the passionate impulse of a lover towards Nadine, but only aching anxiety and pitiful yearning—something also of the despairing self-reproach which a rescued man might feel who, faint and helpless, is compelled to watch from the

shore the drowning agonies of a late companion for whom there is no possibility of aid.

But predominant in the rush of emotions that swept his being was the sense of yearning and devotion towards Margaret—an aim glowing starlike in the future, a salvation that reconciled him to the present inevitable anguish.

For, complete separation of his lot from that of Nadine, complete bursting of the old bonds, which would admit of no such half measure as friendship, was urged upon him now, even more peremptorily than when he had bidden her farewell before her departure for Italy.

At length, without looking up, he said in shaken but insistent tones,—

"You have made your lot. I must always

grieve deeply that it is a wretched one. As long as I live you will be to me a bitter memory. But I see no way in which I can help or comfort you. To alter the past is impossible; and harking back upon it can only give useless pain to us both. Nadine, there is nothing I can say now which I have not urged in the old days, and speech seems a mockery. What right have I——? I used to tell you that in self-hatred lay the germ of effort. Try to think so. You *can*—you *must* make your life blessed."

Tears gathered in Nadine's eyes and fell slowly. Her lips quivered.

"It is only you who could ever have done anything for me," she whispered.

Bramwell could not bear to look at her. He rose and walked to the piano, against

which he leaned, covering his face with his hand. She stretched out her arms to him imploringly, and said in a passionate manner,

"Are we not both wretched? We were mistaken. It would have been better if I had put forth my strength and held you to me. I can still grieve you. Have I lost the power of making you happy?"

Again there was silence. Nadine had risen too, and stood, with head bent, facing Bramwell. Her breath came hard and thick, and a blush suffused her face.

Bramwell straightened himself and advanced a step towards her.

"Princess!" he said deliberately, "everything is changed between us now. You are right: Nadine is no more; and the old feelings are dead too, and can never return.

We may still be conscious of pain in a wounded limb even when the limb has been taken away. So it is with my feeling towards you—it is only now the echo of a passionate love and a bitter pain. . . . But life cannot end when that mad love, which is known but once, dies and is buried. New affections, new duties spring up for us over its grave. And—I quote your own words—why should we not halt at the green places in the desert? why not gather the flowers which are so rare? I wished to avoid you. I would not have come to-day but that I had a definite object in view, which obliged me to seek you. After to-day, I would if I could, draw a veil between the past and the future. Perhaps I fear you still. Perhaps—I scarcely know what I feel. But I see a new existence opening before

me, which has claims incompatible with the old. There *is* one way in which you can make me happier—this is the purpose which has brought me here. You can help me to win for my wife the woman whom I love."

While he had been speaking Nadine's face had grown slowly paler and more rigid. With a slow, stately movement she turned from him, and stood silent, with head bent and fingers lightly interlaced. Bramwell could only guess dimly at what was passing through her mind. In one of those swift and inexplicable flashes of memory, which under dissimilar circumstances connect phases of thought, certain words which Nadine had spoken years before recurred to him, seeming to stand forth in letters of fire.

"The very sense that I had power over you held the confession back. I could not endure to lose the power. And all that was worst in me came uppermost—it was like the taste of blood to a wild creature that has been brought up tame."

At length she turned again.

With all her marvellous self-command she could hardly have been conscious of the change which had taken place in her face. It was hard and grey as that of a corpse. All sweetness and womanliness had vanished from it. Her eyes gleamed with a pale fire, and her head was upraised, showing the spasmodic working of her throat.

Bramwell felt that the spiritual distance between them had suddenly become immeasurable. A sensation of repulsion came

over him, which deepened as she answered in even, metallic tones—

"The lady whom you love is my friend, Margaret Blundell."

He bowed affirmatively.

"You ask my help in inducing her to become your wife? I should not have supposed, Dr. Bramwell, that any inducement could be necessary; nor do I see now what assistance *I* can render you."

Bramwell directed a searching glance towards her face; but her eyes were lowered as she played with an ornament that hung from her *châtelaine*. He answered with a composure which emulated her own,—

"You are aware that in my house there resides now a child named Evelyn Gage, whom I call my ward. I charged myself

with the care of this little girl under peculiar circumstances, which honour forbids me to reveal without the consent of her mother. Of late, remarks of the child's nurse, Mrs. Gaythorne, who, though pledged to secresy, has grown garrulous with age, and has always entertained her own convictions upon the subject, which I have never attempted to uproot, have aroused injurious suspicions concerning my relationship to the child. Mrs. Blundell has made these suspicions a pretext for forbidding me to become her daughter's suitor. She absolutely refuses her consent to my marriage with Margaret unless I can offer her a full explanation of Evelyn's parentage, and my reasons for assuming her guardianship, exonerating myself from odium."

The Princess smiled icily and seated herself again, while she remarked with perfect and marvellous coolness,—

"Mrs. Blundell is a woman of the world; I know her well. It is surprising that she should be troubled by such refined scruples. But she is anxious that her daughter should marry Lord Seagrave. That was evident two years ago—at Rome. I wonder that she has not succeeded in carrying out her wishes —she usually does so. It is a pity that Margaret is so yielding in disposition. Entirely devoted as she is to her mother, she would sacrifice her own happiness rather than overleap any real or fancied obstacle which Mrs. Blundell might put forward. I am sorry for you in your difficulty, Dr. Bramwell, but I still fail to see how I can help you."

"Nadine!" exclaimed Bramwell excitedly, "you have a strong influence over Mrs. Blundell: this I know positively, though I am ignorant of the manner in which you have gained it. Perhaps your rank impresses her; perhaps you have lent her money."

"You are right," replied the Princess composedly. "I *have* lent her money—to pay her gambling debts at Nice."

"Exercise this influence upon my behalf. By means of your hold upon her, force her to consent to my marriage with Margaret. Is this a great thing for *me* to beg of *you?* I do not demand of you the sacrifice which I might claim, but which a man of honour has no right to exact from a woman. I do not bid you reveal your shame, or tell the tale of that miserable night at Croxham."

"*What night?*—you forget we decided that Nadine had ceased to exist. It is the Princess Titchakoff to whom you are appealing. And what has she to do with you, or with the child, your ward?—*nothing*. I refuse to exercise any influence which I may possess over Mrs. Blundell for the furtherance of your marriage with Margaret."

Bramwell started back like one stunned by an unexpected blow, and stood gazing at Nadine in surprise and incredulous horror.

"Are you the woman I once loved—whom I believed to be the embodiment of all that is noble and true?" he cried in passionate upbraiding—"the woman who came to me in her despair, and whom I saved at the peril of my professional honour, at the sacrifice of all I held dearest? Is there

no spark of gratitude or womanly feeling in your heart, no germ of motherhood in your bosom? Will you deny your own child?"

"I deny that I have ever borne a child," said the Princess unflinchingly. "If you can prove it, do so."

"*You must be mad!*" Goaded to fury, Bramwell darted forward and seized her wrist. "Are you not wearing on your finger the very ring which was the proof of your shame? Do you not know that I can denounce you to the world, to your husband?"

The Princess started to her feet, shaking herself free from his grasp. She retreated a few steps, and faced him like a hunted animal at bay. She was trembling visibly, but her eyes shot fire.

"You threaten me!" she said, in a tone of concentrated passion. "I defy you. Do your worst. Blare out to the world what you are pleased to call my shame. Go and proclaim that at Croxham, on such a night, I became the mother of a child whom you adopted as your ward. Who will believe your word, supported by that of an old woman in her dotage, against the evidence of your own actions—of your own handwriting?"

As Nadine spoke she touched the secret spring of an escritoire which stood near her, and drew a folded yellow sheet of paper from the receptacle which suddenly revealed itself. This she shook open and held out before him.

In an instant he had recognized it—the heading, Croxham; the date; the superscription. It was the letter which he had

written to Mr. Senguin, describing the alleged nature of Nadine's illness.

The Princess replaced the document. The sliding panel closed. She stood—her lips curling in a triumphant smile—mistress of the situation.

"Madam," said Bramwell with ironical emphasis, bowing low before he withdrew, "you have mistaken your vocation. You would have made a great actress. I can say no more. You have turned against me the weapon with which I saved your life. Farewell."

CHAPTER III.

CONQUERED

When Bramwell quitted the presence of Princess Titchakoff he suffered himself to be driven away, neither knowing nor caring whither. His whole being was in a tumult of disgust, passion, despair. Life seemed to hold no further good. Even the image of Margaret was blurred by the tears which he could not refrain from shedding over his broken bubble, his vanished ideal.

The day passed like a feverish dream. On his way home from one of his visits Bramwell

drove through the Park, which at this hour was thronged; and at the distance of a few feet passed Nadine in the Ladies' Mile. She was sitting in her carriage, beautifully dressed, faintly flushed, and smiling with apparent animation upon a young *attaché* who faced her. By her side was the wife of one of the foreign ambassadors. Suddenly she turned her head and met Bramwell's gaze levelled full at her. There was in her eyes and upon her tremulous lips an indefinable expression, which, with her vague allusions still fresh in his mind, revealed to him too surely the secret of her artificial vivacity. Hapless Nadine! slave to the worst tyranny which can hold a woman in thrall! Again there came over him the terrible feeling of watching her drown and of being unable to stretch forth a hand

to save her. For the second during which they were face to face she looked at him unflinchingly, making not the slightest sign of recognition. Her carriage proceeded, but Bramwell's was detained for a minute or more by the pressure of the throng. As he waited, his ear caught the note of a falsetto voice which he knew, and he overheard the following brief dialogue interchanged between two people among the row of bystanders, whom he recognized respectively as Mrs. Bartelotte and Mr. Deodatus Lumley.

"So there's the Princess Titchakoff. Well, I guess *she* does not require much instruction in social philosophy. The world has gone better with her than it would have done if she had eloped with poor Jack Halkett. They are trying to do away with Providence now-

a-days; but it is a convenient method of accounting for things, not that I am very partial to reasons. They are like the heavy bills that come in at Christmas after one has worn out one's gowns; but Jack Halkett's sudden death at that particular juncture—for nothing will ever persuade me there was not something behind the scenes—was one of those curious coincidences which require a special dispensation."

"Ah!" observed Mr. Lumley thoughtfully. "How well I remember reading the lines of Nadine Senguin's hand. I foretold drama in her life."

"You did not read her marriage lines," retorted Mrs. Bartelotte, "or you might have made your fortune on Ascot Heath long ago. As for drama, I should not wonder if our

pretty Princess had a precious deal of that before her. It is rumoured that Siberia is likely to be Titchakoff's last resting-place. I hear that the Emperor has discovered his Nihilist proclivities, and has recalled him to Russia."

"If I were not aware that no foreigner can understand Russian politics, I should be surprised that a man of Titchakoff's wealth and influence should compromise himself in revolutionary politics," said Mr. Lumley.

"You wouldn't say so if you had seen him tackle a mad dog as I once did," replied Mrs. Bartelotte. "Russians like to light their pipes beside a barrel of gunpowder. Titchakoff would compromise himself in any way provided there were a petticoat involved in the matter, and Vera Vassalis is at the bottom of his politics."

Late that evening Bramwell sat alone in his study. Eleven o'clock had long since struck. The house was still; and the fire which he had caused to be lighted—for the night was cold and chilly—burned low in the grate. Suddenly he was startled by the sound of a peal from without. He rose nervously, and waited, listening to the footsteps of the servant who answered the summons. Then he heard a rapid parley in the hall, and a woman's voice, the tones of which thrilled him still, raised in imperious expostulation. Presently the door of his own room opened, and a lady was ushered in.

She was covered almost to her feet by a long mantle of some sombre rich stuff: and a black lace scarf was twisted round her throat and head, concealing the lower part

of her face. But her pencilled brows and dark eyes, shining with a lustre almost unnatural, were visible; and it needed no second glance to convince Bramwell of the identity of his visitor. He saw before him the Princess Titchakoff.

She waited till the door had been closed again and they were alone; then loosening her cloak, let it fall behind her, and threw aside her disguising head-dress. She was in full evening costume of gleaming white satin and filmy lace; diamonds shone upon her neck and arms, at her bosom, and in her hair; in her hands she carried a large bouquet of stephanotis and snowy carnations. She was evidently on her way to, or had just quitted some splendid entertainment.

He could not speak—surprise numbed his

faculties; and yet, had he been capable of reflection, he might have considered that inconsistency was the only certain thing which could be predicted of Nadine.

She advanced—her shoulders bare and gleaming with her jewels—as a tragedy queen might have walked the stage, and stood facing him, her arm resting upon the mantelpiece, dazzling him by her magnificence and her beauty.

"I am the last person, after our interview to-day, whom you could have expected to see. Nevertheless, I have come. . . And not in my mood of this morning—that has passed. I am Nadine—variable as of old, impetuous, cruel, but not wholly heartless, not wholly ungrateful. I am here—" her voice faltered, and she stretched out her arms entreatingly

—"I have come to humble myself before you—to beseech you to forgive me."

She sank upon the ground at his feet and uplifted her face, transformed again—now all womanliness, full of tender pleading, childlike in its submission.

"You have borne so much, you have forgiven so much. And after to-night we may never meet again. Let us be at peace with each other. I do not wish to live in your heart a cruel memory. I do not wish you to hate me—you are too dear to me .... Think of me kindly sometimes, if always sorrowfully. I have done everything that you desired. If it lies in my power to make you happy you shall be so. To-morrow go to Mrs. Blundell—you will find that all opposition on her part is withdrawn. Margaret shall be yours. Nay,

more—I have written my confession to her, which I give to you. Maybe that you will wish to justify yourself to your wife. That confession is my expiation of the wrong I have done you."

He tried to raise her.

"Nadine! Nadine!" he cried in a choked voice. "It is I who am cruel."

She shook her head, smiling mournfully.

"No. Sit here, and let me remain so. I have something to give you."

She drew from her bosom two documents: one was creased and yellow—this she cast into the bed of coals and watched burning till it was consumed to blackness; the other, a sealed envelope directed to Margaret Blundell, she placed in his hand.

"I have destroyed your letter to my father.

In this I have told Margaret everything. You will forgive me now? . . . I said—that it was only you who could ever make me do any good thing. Oh, I wish you well—I hope you may be happy."

Sobs checked her utterance. He raised her two hands to his lips; she felt tears fall hot upon them.

"I have only one thing to beg of you. I place no restrictions upon your use of this letter. It may be shown to Margaret before or after your marriage, as you will. But do not give it to her till a fortnight has passed. By that time I shall have left England. I am going with my husband to Russia."

Bramwell uttered an exclamation of horror.

"There is no cause for alarm," answered

Nadine composedly. "And if there were, what matter?—women such as I am, bear charmed lives. If misery could kill I should have died long ago. And of what consequence whether I die in a Russian palace or a Siberian hovel? —life has no more sweetness for me."

She raised herself, and stood leaning against the mantel-shelf. Her eyes wandered round the room, noting everything; it was as though she were trying to imprint upon her memory all the details and surroundings of his life. At last her gaze rested upon him in sadness indescribable. Her lips quivered, and a deep-drawn sob shook her frame.

Intense yearning filled Bramwell's heart, and swept from it every other feeling. He saw in her only Nadine, forsaken, wretched —a lost soul going into darkness. Again

he clasped her hands, kissing them wildly; a torrent of passionate entreaty burst from his lips. He might have been praying for his own happiness, so urgent were his words. He implored her, for his sake, for the sake of her youth, to take pity upon herself. He besought her to try and build up the ruins of her life, to be true to her real nature, to make of her sorrow a baptism into a worthier future.

Nadine tried to speak, but voice failed her. When he had ceased she remained motionless, her hands still clasped in his, her face wearing almost the expression of one who has lost consciousness. At last there seemed to come a revival of feeling; tears began to fall anew, and she said, with an effort at calmness,—

"It is of no use; I can never be different.

It will be best for me if I can grow completely hard, and not care—after to-night. . . . But to-night I should like—it is a strange wish for me. . . . I want to see my child, if it be possible."

"You shall see her. I will bring her to you," answered Bramwell.

He left the room. After a few minutes he returned, bearing the little girl in his arms. She was fast asleep. Her rounded limbs drooped helplessly; the tiny head, with face upturned, rested upon his shoulder, over which fell the tangled masses of her fair hair.

Nadine bent forward with a strange, pathetic movement. Upon her face was a struggling expression of wonder, awe, tenderness; but she made no effort to kiss the child or to take it in her arms.

"She is very pretty," said Nadine in a choked whisper, lifting the little hand, and stroking it softly and timidly—"not like me. She is like—her father."

Then suddenly the unhappy woman uttered a smothered cry and flung herself upon the sofa. Burying her face in her hands, she wept convulsively.

But the paroxysm did not last long. When it had passed she rose, tearless and white, and automatically fastened her mantle and adjusted her scarf.

"Farewell," she said.

Again she paused before Bramwell, and the mother's instinct awoke and cried. She held out her arms, and clasped the child to her bosom. Evelyn's eyes opened, large, dark, wistful, but showing no terror of the

agonized face bent over hers. With a sleepy gesture she lifted her hands caressingly to her mother's cheek.

Nadine murmured some faint, inarticulate words of endearment. She strained the child closer to her heart, and kissed passionately the unconscious lips, then thrust her again into Bramwell's arms, and went forth silently to play in the world that part which she had chosen.

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR.

"I HAVE tried, as you requested, to glean from Calderwood some further particulars of the career of Nadine, Princess Titchakoff, but with no success. He hints darkly at a certain diplomatic mission to St.

Petersburg in which he was at one period of his life engaged, and during which presumably he became acquainted with the Princess's secret. In what manner I know not, but there is room for conjecture, that for the second time in her life her strange, complex, emotional nature required the safety-valve of confession; and Calderwood may have enacted the part of another Bramwell. He has intimated to me that to reveal more would be a violation of honour, and possibly involve him in the betrayal of State secrets; and I am bound to respect his reticence. The close of your narrative strikes me as being somewhat abrupt, and as hardly fulfilling the dramatic essentials which the opening would appear to indicate. But it must be remembered that these events really occurred some twenty-five or thirty years ago; and that for purposes of fiction you have transposed their key, in order to meet the actualities of modern fashion,

society, language, and Americanisms. Thus, to strike fresh chords, or to pursue further the struggles and failures of Nadine, would involve you in anachronisms and inconsistencies, which you now happily avoid.

"But Calderwood's vague hints set the mind working; and the respective mental and moral attitudes of our *dramatis personæ* offer an interesting field for speculation to the social philosopher and dabbler in the mysteries of human relationships.

"I am assured that Bramwell and his wife are, in spite of the anxious and pessimist temperament of the former, supremely happy. An opportune attack of rheumatic fever carried off Mrs. Blundell shortly after her daughter's marriage to our excellent, if slightly priggish, physician; otherwise I should be disposed to cherish a doubt of the felicity which my friend describes in enthusiastic terms.

"Mrs. Bramwell has never had children, but

has always exhibited a marked attachment to her husband's ward. The beauty of this lady, now the wife of Lord ——, ambassador at the Court of ——, has for some time been the theme of society journals; and mysterious rumours concerning her parentage are still in circulation, vaguely inferring that blood no less azure than that of foreign royalty flows in her veins.

"Have she and the Princess Titchakoff ever held hands or brushed garments in fashionable Roman salons or on crowded Parisian staircases? Upon this point Calderwood is silent.

"Bramwell is, I am told, one of the most celebrated physicians in Europe, famous for psychological discovery, and for the successful treatment of maladies connected with the nerves and brain. What a sign of the times and of the deterioration of the human species, that this branch of physiology is becoming the *spécialité* of the age! I have always

proclaimed the fallacy of the positivist theory of eternity. Before the race can be enabled to attain an earthly immortality, it must first be endowed by science with a sound digestion and an improved nervous system warranted to withstand the ravages of civilization."

THE END.

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